

CYBERPUNK 2077 AMAZING NEW GAMEPLAY DETAILS
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STUNNING HANDS-ON VERDICT
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A few days after we went to press with our last edition a tragic and fatal shooting took place in Jacksonville, Florida at a Madden tournament taking place there. Shortly after that time I posted a message on our social media feeds expressing our heartbreak and deepest sympathies to those involved, but with more information now to hand I wanted to share what we know and remember those affected more specifically.

Elijah Clayton was 22, from Woodland Hills, California, and played under the handle "TruBoy". Taylor Robertson was 28, from Giles, West Virginia, and played under the name "SpotMePlzzz". Clayton and Robertson were taking part in a qualifier tournament for the Madden Classic series. Clayton was in the middle of a game when the attack began and both were fatally shot in a senseless act of violence by a third competitor who also shot themselves and died at the scene. Ten other people were wounded by gunfire at the event at the pizzeria in Jacksonville that day, as well as one other with non-gunshot-related injuries.

As a way to support the victims, EA has set up a Jacksonville Tribute Fund with an initial contribution of $1 million. An additional $50,000 has been raised at the time of writing this and more contributions are welcome. The fund has been set up with the help of the National Compassion Fund and GoFundMe so that 100 per cent of the money will go towards supporting the victims and their families. The link to the GoFundMe page is below if you would like to offer your support.

As I said in my statement at the time, games are supposed to be fun. So, I'm sorry to start this issue with something so upsetting, but I hope that we can all find strength and resolve in the face of such acts and see that our shared passion for gaming means more than whatever small differences in taste we might have. I would like to think that's what we celebrate with every issue of **games™** and I'm committed to continuing that in the future.

With all that now said, thanks for reading. I hope you enjoy the rest of the issue.

Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE JACKSONVILLE TRIBUTE FUND PLEASE GO TO WWW.GOFUNDME.COM/JAXTRIBUTEFUND


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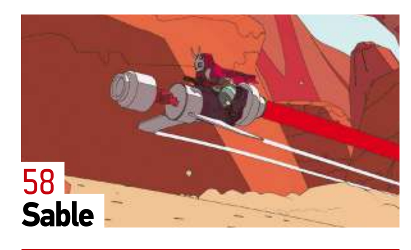
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ANTHEM

We strap in to BioWare's stunning new experience and quiz its game director on how it's making a shared world we can believe in

DIE WITH HONOUR IN SEKIRO: SHADOWS DIE TWICE

→ WITH A FRESH TAKE ON AN OLD CONCEPT, CAN FROMSOFTWARE DISRUPT THE ACTION GENRE? WE GET OUR HANDS ON IT TO FIND OUT ONCE AND FOR ALL

FORMAT: **PS4, XBOX ONE, PC** | PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION** | DEVELOPER: **FROMSOFTWARE**
RELEASE: **22 MARCH 2019** | PLAYERS: **1**

You can feel it brushing over you in an instant; the winds of change guiding FromSoftware towards an all-new horizon. We are going to go right ahead and suggest that you check your expectations at the door; after we seized upon the opportunity to get our hands on the studio's latest endeavour, it's clear that it has about as much in common with the SoulsBorne games as *Chromehounds* did to *Armored Core*. The studio – led as ever by the enigmatic Hidetaka Miyazaki – has made no secret of its desire to start afresh. FromSoftware has, after all, poured much of its creative energy and resources into refining a single design philosophy over the decade. It's finally time for the studio to do what it does best: free itself from the shackles of an exhausted formula in an effort to fully unleash its imagination and see where that may lead it.

The result is *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*, a stealth-action experience heavily inspired by the myth and legend that helped define the late-16th century Sengoku period of Japan. You take control of a shinobi dubbed Sekiro, the One-Armed Wolf, who is duty-bound to reclaim a young lord that was kidnapped under his charge. To do so, you must step into the heart of the Ashina clan, although completing such a task is far easier said than done, for in this world nothing is quite what it seems.

While previous FromSoftware action-RPGs have been built around a foundation of slow, cautious play – forcing you to seize upon any opportunities that may present themselves with methodical precision – *Sekiro* is a stark shift away from this mentality. Here, you must make full use of your shinobi training, utilising more aggressive tactics and decisive actions in combat to progress.

The game worked to quickly acclimatise us to this shift by putting us up against a number of sickeningly fast foes. That goes for both the fodder and the named mini-bosses, enemies that take some degree of perseverance to bring to the ground that we begin to encounter as we push deeper into the castle grounds. It's funny, as while *Sekiro* may give us the capacity to evade their attacks with a side-step dodge, it's little more than a parlour trick in the grand scheme of things.

IN BRIEF
Dark Souls and *Bloodborne* developer FromSoftware joins up with Activision for an all-new stealth-action adventure experience

Sekiro is primarily designed around swordplay – two-handed combat with a katana, to be exact. While dodging is certainly an option should you want to try some slick manipulation of hit-boxes, you'll likely find that this will only get you cut down a little quicker. Instead, this is a game of blocking and parrying. We'll be perfectly blunt about this too; if you don't enjoy parrying mechanics then you aren't going to enjoy *Sekiro* all that much.

Both Sekiro himself and every enemy that you encounter comes equipped with their very own Posture gauge. This depletes as blows are landed with R1, a standard attack with your sword that transitions seamlessly into combos as you land multiple blows – a powerful charge attack can also be unleashed by holding R1 at any point during a combo, the move differing depending on when you choose to utilise it. Once the Posture gauge is expended entirely it invokes a stun, leaving your foe (or yourself, if you aren't careful) open to an absolutely crushing Shinobi Deathblow. There's some »



"SEKIRO IS PRIMARILY DESIGNED AROUND SWORDPLAY, TWO-HANDED COMBAT WITH A KATANA TO BE EXACT"



NEW CHALLENGER APPROACHES

■ This is a brand new IP from the creators of *Dark Souls* – an action game that looks to explore the legend of the ninja.

PREPARE TO DIE

■ The focus is on one-versus-one combat scenarios, using reflexes and precision to get in a position of power over some truly monstrous enemies.

MOBILITY IS KEY

■ You'll need to leverage all of the movement and mobility options given to you. This is far faster than the experience presented in the SoulsBourne games.

A FRESH START

■ *Sekiro* represents the future of FromSoftware, with both the Dark Souls and Bloodborne series on ice for an indefinite amount of time.

DRAWING FROM THE PAST

When FromSoftware put its time with *Bloodborne* to one side back in 2015, it began to envision and conceptualise what would come next. Hidetaka Miyazaki landed on one concept that he wanted to leverage, that of the Ninja. As the studio latched onto this idea and began to explore it, another possibility emerged: that of leveraging the Tenchu licence it had acquired from Activision in 2004 (who, as it should happen, is lined up to publish *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*).

Quick history lesson: *Tenchu: Stealth Assassins*, released in 1998 just a handful of months before *Metal Gear Solid*, would redefine what stealth-action looked like during the PlayStation era. While many of the Tenchu games have been developed by Acquire over the years, FromSoftware has assisted with port development and publishing since 2004. Miyazaki, an unapologetic fan of the IP, did for a time consider utilising it, though he would ultimately change course by the time *Sekiro* materialised. FromSoftware was eager to avoid putting its latest endeavour under the Tenchu banner to avoid detracting from the core characteristics that came to define that series, as well as avoid any limitations it may encounter as a result of using it. That was important for Miyazaki, as he wanted his team to be free to experiment as it approached its first project in a post-Dark Souls and *Bloodborne* world.

Instead, FromSoftware has dipped into its history to help inform *Sekiro*'s design. It is inspired by Tenchu's blend of stealth-action; it is drawing from *Yoshitsune Eiyūden: The Story Of Hero Yoshitsune* and *Otogi: Myth Of Demons* with respect to character, world and story design; it is looking to the meticulous combat and level design of Demon Souls, Dark Souls and *Bloodborne*. The result is something that will undoubtedly demand your attention when it gets released in March 2019.



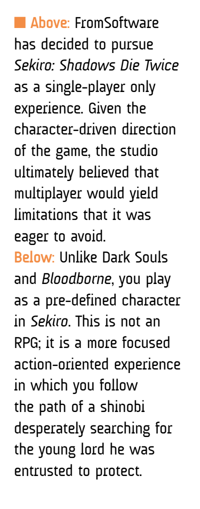








■ Above: *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* has been in development since late 2015. FromSoftware began pre-production shortly after work had concluded on *Bloodborne*'s final DLC, *The Old Hunters*. While it began life as a new game in the Tenchu series, it is now a brand new IP, arriving 22 March 2019.



■ Above: FromSoftware has decided to pursue *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* as a single-player only experience. Given the character-driven direction of the game, the studio ultimately believed that multiplayer would yield limitations that it was eager to avoid.
Below: Unlike Dark Souls and *Bloodborne*, you play as a pre-defined character in *Sekiro*. This is not an RPG; it is a more focused action-oriented experience in which you follow the path of a shinobi desperately searching for the young lord he was entrusted to protect.

degree of nuance to this system too; as your health decreases, so too does the rate in which your posture recovery speed deteriorates. Battles are hinged entirely on mitigating damage by any means necessary.

Guarding [holding L1] is certainly an option, although *Sekiro* is ever pushing you towards the parry; tapping L1 at the moment an attack is about to strike you results in a Deflect, leaving your foe open to a devastating counter – immediately stepping forwards [tapping Circle] as you hear the clash of steel to perform a Mikiri strike. It's worth noting that stamina isn't anything that you need concern yourself with here. Should you get too liberal with the use of an attack or defensive manoeuvre, you'll quickly know about it – enemies can be absolutely ruthless and unrelenting if you aren't careful.

It's clear that we have barely scratched the surface of what *Sekiro*'s combat has to offer from our time with the game, although the fundamentals are clear. This is a game built around reflexes rather than brute force; combat is constructed around agility and positioning, asking you to look for vulnerabilities in the posture of your aggressor, pressuring them into making a mistake or die trying.

Sekiro is, in so many ways, a refreshing change of pace for FromSoftware. If this is truly to be the studio's take on a 'traditional' action game then that it is an obtuse one at that. In the build we played, at least, *Sekiro* kept many of its mechanics and systems shrouded in mystery; the seemingly limited play area concealing many secrets in its corners, lore scattered in blood in its detailed environments, and the variety of enemies only just beginning to reveal their true nature as we reached the demo's conclusion against an all-mighty enemy we are forbidden from talking about in any great detail.



One such area of contention that we were left vying with is the way *Sekiro* handles death and resurrection. Sculptor's Idols can be found dotted across the space, which act as checkpoints in the world, although there's another force at play. You also have the ability to utilise a limited Resurrection technique, should you want to continue against a boss or particularly difficult enemy without sacrificing your progression in the battle. You can use this technique twice; killing enemies can refill the first charge, although the second can only be replenished by praying at the foot of an Idol. It's an interesting idea, one that *SoulsBorne* fans will likely decry, though we're certain it will only add to the tension and drama *Sekiro* is so clearly trying to cultivate in its starring battles.

Of course, attempting to refill the Resurrection Technique gauge isn't the only reason you'll want to throw yourself into direct confrontation with all of the fodder that you'll encounter. Most will drop White Spirit Emblems, paper dolls that are said to contain the spirits of the dead, each of which grants you the opportunity to add a little more tactical variety to the way in which you can approach combat situations. The Emblems fuel your prosthetic tools – limited-use special weapons that are contained within your left arm, a prosthetic that was gifted to you by a mysterious Busshi.

The demo presented three to us (cycled through with Triangle and activated with R2) – a ranged assault, an AOE strike and a focused heavy attack. Shurikens are a long raged aerial attack that cost one White Spirit Emblem; these can also be chained into a Quick Dash attack by quickly tapping R1. It's a great manoeuvre for closing distances between you and an enemy. Flame Vent costs two Emblems and will expel a burst of fire in front of you, though you can make further use of the flames by dragging your sword through them, setting your sword alight for a limited time to let you inflict powerful status damage attacks on certain enemies. The Loaded Axe is our favourite of the bunch, a powerful attack that costs two Emblems to use, and is excellent at ratcheting up Posture damage and destroying shields; pressing R2 after it connects with an enemy will expend two more Emblems and unleash a more powerful follow-up axe attack that also comes with Poise, meaning it can only be interrupted by the most powerful of foes once it's in action. It's pretty damned handy in a tight jam, should you have the space and time to unleash it in the first place.

It's going to take far longer than an hour with a vertical slice of the game to fully understand the nuance behind many of *Sekiro*'s systems and gain a mastery over its mechanics. It does, however, feel as if it has been built on solid foundations, its roots in precision parrying and persistent situational awareness.

Of course, combat isn't the only area of *Sekiro* that is worth focusing on. We were particularly impressed by the interlocking design of the level – even in such a contained space – and degree of mobility that your character is granted across it. Sekiro comes equipped with a grappling hook – an attachment to your prosthetic arm requiring no Emblems to utilise – that lets you whip between grapple points strewn all across the world, some of which can only be targeted as you begin to chain grapples together. We located a secret area off of the beaten path, found only through precision application of your movement and momentum abilities, leading to an encounter with a powerful Monk that would eventually drop Divine Confetti – a rare find that helps expel darkness, allowing us to hit Ghost-type enemies. A headless creature of such description could be found hidden, should you look hard enough. Our lips are sealed on that one for the time being.

There are dedicated jump and crouch buttons; Sekiro can hang from ledges and hug walls to avoid detection Solid Snake-style, he too can drop into long grass to conceal himself from enemies and deal out instant-kill stealth attacks to any foolish enough to wade into his vicinity. All of these can and should be combined to find hidden paths through the world, to open up new angles of attack, and utilised in combat to re-position yourself against enemies and gain advantages by any means necessary.

Sekiro isn't another sludge against an ever-surmounting collection of threats in a decidedly gothic world. Instead, it's a game that expects you to adapt to the tools that you have available to you, embracing the proficiencies of a shinobi, and to contort them as you see fit to better adapt to the rhythm of this world and the enemies that inhabit it. It's all about edging ever closer towards the final blow. A game where you must become one with the very idea of attack and defence as one solid action, governed by movement and enacted through precision.



THE SENSATIONAL

Night City in its current form is without question one of the most incredible constructions we have ever seen in a videogame. The scope of it is, to be frank, baffling; no matter where you look, it's there sprawling off into the distance. Given the recent news that the game world extends outside of the city limits and off into the surrounding wastelands is dizzying. And then there's the scale of it… the scale is unprecedented. That is to say, that regardless of whether you're on foot or behind the wheel of a vehicle, every one of its elements looks perfectly proportioned to the player. We've seen some pretty impressive digital worlds in the last decade, but none can compare to what CDPR has revealed here.

'WITH CYBERPUNK 2077, SEEING TRULY IS BELIEVING'

→ IS CD PROKJECT RED ON THE RIGHT TRACK WITH ITS LATEST RPG?

FORMAT: **PC, PS4, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **CD PROJEKT RED** | DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | RELEASE: **TBC** | PLAYERS: **1**

You should have seen it by now, the 40-minute gameplay demonstration that is. That's *40 minutes* of in-engine action that, if nothing else, serves as proof that this hasn't all been some sort of shared delusion on the part of the press – a fever dream that has haunted us unendingly through sheer brilliance alone. We understand that it was beginning to feel that way for anybody who wasn't so lucky as to see it behind-closed-doors. The mystique that was growing around the game was becoming untenable, even for a studio of CD Project's calibre.

And listen, we get it. It can be all too easy to speak exclusively in hyperbole when discussing *Cyberpunk 2077* but, as you've no doubt learnt for yourself by now, it's worthy of almost all of the praise that is receiving. It's hard to escape the feeling that we've just taken a glimpse into the future of immersive, interactive worlds – let alone the RPG genre.

IN BRIEF
The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt developer CD Projekt RED returns with its latest RPG, this time set in Mike Pondsmith's legendary *Cyberpunk* universe

Still, we were recently treated to a fresh demonstration (different from the version presented online) and it has helped distil our thoughts on it even further, as such opportunity gave us the chance to see different interactions between characters and the different options we will be presented with when progressing through the impressive construction that is Night City and the quest design. Here, you'll find the elements of *Cyberpunk 2077* that we found to be sensational, merely good and, yes, even a little ugly. After all, even the most beautiful rose still has thorns.

THE UGLY

■ So much of the *Cyberpunk 2077* demonstration is subject to change; the studio was keen to stress that to us. From the character creation system to the UI overlay, the combat systems to the quest design, and more. One element we hope to see change is the dialogue and voice acting. Tonally, it felt off, at odds to what we have seen of the world. There's also the question of what CDPR means as it classifies *Cyberpunk 2077* as a 'Mature' game. All we've seen thus far to support this is an over-abundance of sex, drugs and swearing – themes that we thought were mature when we were teenagers. We hope CDPR carries this Mature classification through the themes and emotional beats of the wider story and world.

THE GOOD

■ Between the two gameplay demonstrations, we've now had the opportunity to see that hideout assault play out a little differently. The impression that we've come away with is that we are only just beginning to scratch the surface of what will be possible in *Cyberpunk 2077*. Given the game has a fluid class system, allowing you to build and tinker with a few foundational combat systems into your perfect play style, the amount of ways that mission could have gone feels like it could indeed be unprecedented for these sorts of experiences. And hey, it could have gone a whole lot differently; the option of walking away before the bullets start flying is a viable option here, and the game will of course respond accordingly. Every decision you make in this world will have a reaction, one reasoned around the logic of the game world.



LIFE IS WHAT YOU MAKE OF IT IN THE SETTLERS

→ FIRST LOOK AT THE RETURN OF THIS LEGACY RTS FRANCHISE

FORMAT: **PC** | PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT** DEVELOPER: **UBISOFT BLUE BYTE** | RELEASE: **Q3 2019** | PLAYERS: **TBC**

What is it about city-building simulations that we find so enticing? Those games that allow us to take on the role of the omnipotent planner, looking on from above as thankless citizens put themselves to work in an effort to advance civilisation under our watchful gaze. It probably has a lot to do with control, of course, and the empowerment we can feel from being able to dictate a community's behaviour.

Control is undoubtedly the reason that we gravitate to games such as *The Settlers*, the legacy RTS returning just in time to celebrate its 25th anniversary. Honestly, we were a little surprised to find Ubisoft bringing this one back into the fold, but we sure are glad it has. We were treated to a detailed behind-closed-doors demonstration of the upcoming game and, we have to say, we were incredibly impressed by what we saw. *The Settlers* tasks you, as it always has done, with taking command of a small group of pioneers and setting them to work exploring and colonising a new world.

IN BRIEF

The Settlers is a city-building simulator where you must guide a group of explorers through the establishment of a new village and helping to oversee its expansion

That we expected. What we didn't expect to see was such granular level of control offered and such expansive attention to detail. The environments are vibrant, though what's truly astounding is that every object within the space is a physical item. What that means in practice is that, should a lumberjack chops down four trees, you'll be able to see four logs at the lumber mill; you can see fishermen pick each and every one of their catches out from the water and cart them back to their huts, and later you'll even be able to spot chefs cooking up a storm and walking over specific meals to hard-working individuals in an effort to help them regain their strength and stamina. It's a level of granular attention that lets the detail-orientated among us keep track of each and every element of their thriving game world. For the rest of you, we are pretty certain you'll just enjoy the spectacle of immersion it offers.

Every single character in your world will have a purpose; a role to play as you look to expand your settlement and explore uncharted territories. These roles can be shifted as





Above: While it hasn't been fully implemented into the engine just yet, *The Settlers* will feature light combat for when you encounter other settlements. While some will need to be taken with brute force, the studio is also implementing a system in which designated heroes can fight for the right of ownership of land in arena combat.



25 years on from its Amiga debut, *The Settlers* returns for an all-new instalment from Blue Byte, overseers of the series since its inception and, more recently, responsible for the Anno line of strategy games. *The Settlers* creator Volker Wertich is even returning to take on creative director duties.



you see fit, should you put in the necessary research into different proficiencies and job roles. Resources can be shared and moved between lots with ease, so long as you spend the time connecting up your settlement with the correct roads and pathways – something that's as simple as threading a string between the coloured nodes attached to every one of your buildings. Before long you'll be laying down town centres and establishing market hubs around them, these areas transforming into thriving hubs for your community. You'll begin to see neighbours assisting one another with tasks and interacting amongst themselves, each of them happy to play a role in your ever-expanding creation.

What's truly impressive about *The Settlers* isn't the vibrant visual style, nor its incredibly detailed environments, or even its surprisingly nimble mechanics helping to govern incredibly complex systems. No, what's truly impressive here is how quickly your humble creation begins to feel as if it is a real community, with each of the settlers working together towards a common purpose. So many RTS games of this style are only concerned with the bigger picture, failing to dial down on the human element contained within the settlement. That's something *The Settlers* is achieving with ease, and we have little doubt that this will be *the* city-building sim to lose yourself to in 2019.



JUST CAUSE 4'S ACTION IS MORE RIDICULOUS THAN EVER

IN BRIEF
Rico Rodriguez is heading to a fictional South American country called Solis for his most ridiculous and technically ambitious adventure yet

→ NATURE STRIKES BACK IN AVALANCHE'S LATEST

1 INTUITIVE MOVEMENT

One of the most appealing aspects of Just Cause has always been traversing through its expansive open-world spaces in spectacular fashion, and the latest instalment to the series takes this to another level. Control between the wingsuit, parachute and grappling hook has been refined; Avalanche has invested considerable time into ensuring that it's more comfortable than ever to chain traversal combos together.

2 BEAUTIFUL WORLD

Just Cause 4 is the first game in the series to make use of the studio's proprietary Apex Engine. This has allowed the studio to really push its tech and toolsets, with *Just Cause 4* looking like a game that has been purpose built to indulge all of your ridiculous, destructive impulses. Everything you see in the game – the trajectory of every single item – is being calculated in real time, allowing for maximum physics-based chaos.

3 EXPANDED PLAY

The fourth instalment will give you the ability to attach multiple airlifters to any object in the game, while boosters can now be placed remotely and precisely on said items to let you create makeshift vehicles of destruction. *Just Cause 4* is wholeheartedly focused on giving you the tools to be as creative as you please in this sandbox.

4 WEATHER EFFECTS

In an effort to keep players moving through the open world, Avalanche has introduced a variety of weather effects to its new land, Solis. Lanes of wind will pick Rico up and push him through the sky at extreme speeds, all in an effort to get him a little closer to the gigantic tornado he is pursuing that is tearing the world to shreds in spectacular fashion. Not only does it look great, it brings a new dynamic to play too.

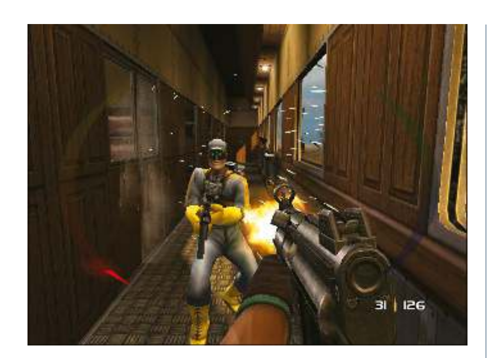


THQ NORDIC IS BUILDING A ROSTER OF CULT CLASSICS

IN BRIEF
From small Austrian developer to triple-A international publisher, THQ Nordic has been picking up some interesting new properties

→ THE FAST-GROWING PUBLISHER HAS BEEN SNAPPING UP IPS LEFT AND RIGHT

FOUNDED: **2008 (AS NORDIC GAMES PUBLISHING)** | KEY GAMES: **THE BOOK OF UNWRITTEN TALES, DEADFALL ADVENTURES, THIS IS THE POLICE**



TIMESPLITTERS

1 THQ Nordic, in mid-August, grabbed the rights to this classic shooter franchise, a series famously started by Free Radical Design, a studio created by former Rare developers who had worked on *GoldenEye 007* and *Perfect Dark*. The last game in the series was *TimeSplitters: Future Perfect*. Funnily enough, the current incarnation of Free Radical Design, now named Dambuster Studios, was acquired by THQ Nordic in February 2018 when the publisher took over Koch Media and Deep Silver. So, all the pieces have clearly come together for the old team to renew the franchise 13 years later.



SECOND SIGHT

2 In the deal that saw THQ Nordic grab up the rights to TimeSplitters, it also picked up *Second Sight*, also originally developed by Free Radical and perhaps even more of a cult gem than TimeSplitters. *Second Sight* was originally launched in 2004 and saw you control an amnesiac with powerful psychic abilities. It happened to be released in the same year as *Psi-Ops* from Midway, another game that also focused on psychic and telekinetic abilities, which is considered to have hurt its chances on release. Its core premise and mechanics were perhaps a little ahead of the time and technology available, so we'd be fascinated to see it given another shot.



KINGDOMS OF AMALUR

3 The most recent acquisition from THQ Nordic saw it pick up the rights to *Kingdoms Of Amalur*, a title owned by 38 Studios, which closed in 2012. The original concept of the game world though was created by former tabletop game designer and Elder Scrolls developer Ken Rolston, in conjunction with legendary comic-book artist and mogul Todd McFarlane handling art and esteemed composer Grant Kirkhope on the score. The final result was a far more action-orientated role-playing experience than some might have expected. It offered very distinct combat styles depending on what weapon combination you chose to specialise in. It definitely had more to offer and there was an MMO in development, which THQ Nordic also now owns.





EVERYTHING OLD IS NEW AGAIN IN RESIDENT EVIL 2

→ HANDS-ON WITH CAPCOM'S STUNNING REIMAGINING OF A SURVIVAL HORROR CLASSIC

FORMAT: **PS4, PC, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM** | DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | RELEASE: **25 JANUARY 2019** | PLAYERS: **1**

It has been two months since the incident at the Spencer Mansion. Chris Redfield – Point Man for the infamous S.T.A.R.S. Alpha Team – is missing in action, prompting his sister Claire to make the long trip down to Raccoon City in search of a few answers. Unfortunately for her, all she finds is a situation that begets more questions; locked in a deadly struggle to survive the outbreak of a deadly virus, forced into an uneasy alliance with rookie cop Leon S. Kennedy as the pair look for a way out of the city before it's too late.

We experienced this hellish situation first hand as we were given the opportunity to take control of Claire, our demo beginning a few hours into her campaign. We crawl apprehensively through the backrooms of the Racoon City Police Department, long after Leon has already scoured the building for insight into why the residents of the city have transformed into nightmarish ghouls. It's difficult to not become distracted by the detail in the environments, *Resident Evil 2* looks positively otherworldly rendered through the RE Engine. Still, there are more pressing matters to attend to than the scenery.

Namely, the shambling horror known to us as G; the sight of his huge shoulder-mounted eye summoning a concoction of nostalgia and abstract horror within us that we find to be captivating. And so there we are, drunk with terror, once again facing off against a creature that has been known to occasionally haunt our nightmares over the past 20 years.

We're running haphazardly through a maze of corridors in a maintenance room now desperately wrestling with a control scheme that at once feels archaic and fluid all at the same time. G emerges through the thick mist filling the room as we attempt to navigate a twisting labyrinth of tight corridors. We root Claire in place, the camera fastening tightly above her shoulder as we pump round after thunderous round into G's head until he stumbles towards us within grappling distance, forcing us to swivel on the spot and break into a light jog to gain some distance. The ping of a casing released from the grenade launcher as satisfying as ever, the low-whir of rounds peppering G's torso from an Uzi an ineffectual comfort in amongst the chaos of the struggle. All of this done in an effort to get that eye to reveal itself – a weak point that can be attacked for massive damage.

> "IT SEEMS STRANGE, BUT THEN WE CAN'T HELP BUT FEEL AS IF IT IS SUPPOSED TO BE."

In a sense, it's so strange to be back here. *Resident Evil 2* controls far better than the original ever did, although it feels a little more tempered than the setup featured in *Resident Evil 4*. Then again, perhaps that's just our brains wrestling with the realities of modern action games versus something that is antiquated by its very design; with no dodge button to speak of, getting out of harm's way is all stiff turns and frantic dashes with your back turned to the enemy.

It seems strange, but then we can't help but feel as if it is supposed to be. Claire's segment is designed to highlight *Resident Evil 2*'s action and intense boss battles – a far cry from Leon's far more atmospheric and tempered segment, as revealed at E3 2018. We have to admit, this demo has done a compelling job of demonstrating just how brilliantly Capcom has modernised *Resident Evil 2*'s gunplay and movement. The controls are precise and easy to use, even if the framework they are presented within is a little rigid. Seeing a room littered with Green Herbs, twinkling red ammunition boxes and strange components begging to be combined within your briefcase hasn't lost any of its lustre, nor has the distinctive enemy, environment and sound design.

Resident Evil 2 feels at once fresh and familiar. Capcom's assertion that this is no mere remake but a total reimagining holds true, with the 2019 release retaining the spirit of the 1998 classic while updating its most outdated aspects – and it has done so without sacrificing any of the character or charm that made it legendary. Whether you're a Resident Evil veteran or a new player eager to see what all of the fuss is about, we are certain that this is going to be a must-play game of the current generation.



Right: Slight changes are being made to the story and order of events, forcing us to reconcile with the recollection of lost memories as they are immediately re-written. We got a sense of this as we saw Sherry Birkin get snatched up in a parking garage by Police Chief Irons. We'll have to wait a little longer to meet Ada Wong it seems.

Right: William 'G' Birkin looks absolutely terrifying in this latest incarnation. He's the sort of character that scared the hell out of one generation and now he is back to ruin another. The level of detail that has gone into every aspect of his mutated body is, frankly, absurd.



Claire Redfield has been redesigned to help her better fit within the photorealistic world that she now finds herself. Eagle-eyed fans may notice that her new look isn't that dissimilar to Elza Walker, the original protagonist of *Resident Evil 2* who ultimately got redeveloped into Claire before the game shipped in 1998.

IN BRIEF

Two decades after its debut, *Resident Evil 2* is back and totally recreated to better play to modern design standards and sensibilities. The results are staggering

ONE STORY, TWO PERSPECTIVES

Capcom has revised its approach to scenario design for *Resident Evil 2*, removing the original structure (Leon A/Claire B and Claire A/Leon B) in favour of something far more straightforward. The original design was innovative at the time, giving players an opportunity to gain a new perspective on the same events, even going so far as to let your actions in one campaign affect elements of the next.

The 'Zapping system', as it was once known, has been thrown out for the revival. Instead, you'll now be able to play through two distinct campaigns, one as Leon and one as Claire, in any order that you so choose – with each character's respective A and B scenarios effectively meshed into one story.

Capcom's reasoning for this is that it wants to cut the chaff, to reduce the tedium that might be incurred by backtracking through the game's areas ad nauseam just to try and see all of the content it has to offer. The studio still wants to show you the same story from two different perspectives, it just wants you to be utterly immersed in the intensity of the adventure as it gradually unfurls itself in front of you.

BATTLEFIELD V IS WELL WORTH YOUR TIME AND ATTENTION

→ HANDS-ON AHEAD OF THE DELAY

FORMAT: **PC, PS4, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **EA** | DEVELOPER: **DICE** | RELEASE: **20 NOV 2018** | PLAYERS: **64**



Above: The scope, flexibility and look of *BFV*'s battlegrounds is quite simply game-changing.

It's difficult to not be a little taken aback by what DICE is presenting to the world this time around, with respect to visual fidelity, scope of action and immersion. When the studio first unleashed *Battlefield 1942*, the industry quickly became mesmerised by DICE's vision of all-out multiplayer warfare, one that was set against the backdrop of World War II. We never imagined that it could get any better. Oh, how naive we were.

It's games like *Battlefield V* that force you to take pause, to take the time to really consider just how far the industry has come in 16 years. Truth be told, it's a little breathtaking. The scope of these battlegrounds is, to be frank, a little ridiculous. While each draws inspiration from a real theatre of war, they all feel perfectly scaled to bring out the best in Battlefield's considered tactical, squad-based play. The frontline is also constantly shifting – that is in part thanks to the introduction of Fortifications. These let you shut down lanes and rebuild elements of the map to better create reinforcement routes for ground infantry and vehicles. Every map we have encountered thus far has such clearly defined flank routes and lines of sight that DICE's authority over level design in the multiplayer space is really placed into perspective.

The feel and weight of the weapons has also been greatly improved over DICE's previous flirtations with historical conflicts. The weapon handling isn't realistic in any sense of the word, but the depiction better lines up with how you'd imagine these guns would feel in your hands. This is, after all, an entertainment product, and the weapons feel ideally placed to let you re-create moments of heroics and domineering action that have largely been reserved for Hollywood depictions of the conflict.

IN BRIEF
EA and DICE take Battlefield back to World War II in its most action-packed instalment to the online-FPS yet

And then there's the visual fidelity, which can only be described as awe-inspiring. We've had our hands on the PC build and, honestly, it's absolutely crazy. If you'd have asked us 16 years ago, we'd have never believed that online shooters could ever look quite as good as this. The Frostbite Engine has always been fantastic for complementing DICE's ability to create excellent art assets, but never before has the package looked so grandiose and all-encompassing, especially when paired with such an impressive degree of procedural-destruction.

What we're trying to say is that *Battlefield V* is the FPS that you should have your eyes on as we approach the winter rush. It's now releasing 20 November and, given the options currently available to you, we're certain that this is going to be a defining moment of the year – if not for the series as a whole. We talk a lot about immersion in this sphere and it can be difficult to define. For good reason too, nobody wants too 'realistic' an interpretation of World War II. It simply wouldn't lend itself to a fun and engaging multiplayer shooter, something which *BFV* achieves with ease. It's fast, ruthless and utterly arresting of your attention once you get into it. What more could we possibly ask for?



LEGENDS RETURN IN STREETS OF RAGE 4

→ AXEL STONE AND BLAZE FIELDING RETURN FOR ROUND TWO

FORMAT: **TBC** | PUBLISHER: **DOTEMU** | DEVELOPER: **GUARD CRUSH GAMES, LIZARDCUBE** | RELEASE: **TBC 2019** | PLAYERS: **TBC**

IN BRIEF
Legendary side-scrolling beat 'em up Streets Of Rage makes an unexpected return in 2019

***Streets Of Rage* is back and it's ready to transport you to a time when gaming was a simpler affair.** It's you and a buddy, roaming the mean streets of Wood Oak City looking to achieve something that the police couldn't – teaching an upstart crime syndicate a lesson in the only language that they can comprehend: *street violence*.

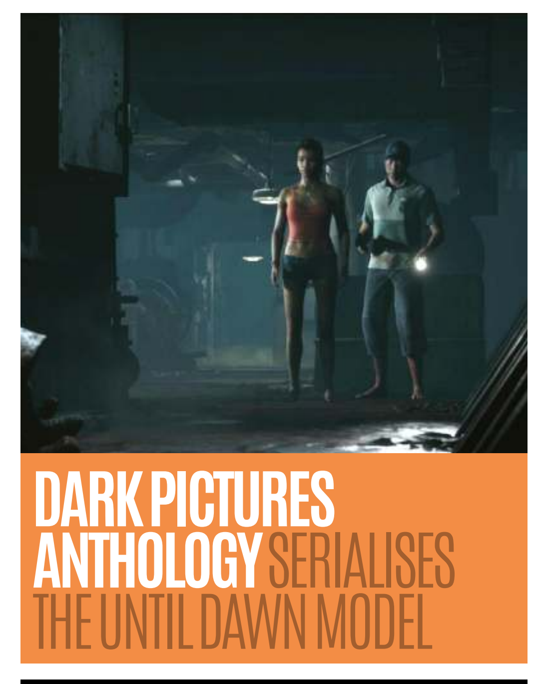
Streets Of Rage 4 isn't looking to change the core foundations of the long-dormant series; developers LizardCube and Guard Crush are simply aiming to restore them for a modern audience. The game is still a collection of side-scrolling bouts, offering the same rhythmic flow to melee combat that so many of us fell in love with back in the early Nineties. Weapons can still be produced from phone booths, fresh health items and pouches of cash plucked from garbage cans – this is Streets Of Rage as you remember it, albeit with a brand new, vibrant art style and a new soundtrack accompanying it.

That isn't to say, of course, that the development teams aren't introducing new ways to engage enemies. The biggest new implementation comes in the form of more nuanced co-operative play, with the brawlers now able to juggle enemies between one another to dish out a maximum amount of justice before being corralled to the next screen of combat. It is little additions such as this that we hope will help give *Streets Of Rage 4* enough personality for it to stand on its own two feet, far from the nostalgia that has encapsulated the three games that have preceded it.









DARK PICTURES ANTHOLOGY SERIALISES THE UNTIL DAWN MODEL

→ EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT SUPERMASSIVE'S LATEST THRILLER

WHAT IS DARK PICTURES ANTHOLOGY?
A collaboration between publisher Bandai Namco and *Until Dawn* developer Supermassive Games, it's a series of intense, standalone horror games in which your decisions and reactions will determine who will and won't survive the various nightmarish situations that you're thrown into.

IS THIS A PS4 EXCLUSIVE?
No. Unlike *Until Dawn*, *Hidden Agenda* or the litany of other games that Supermassive has made as Sony exclusives, the entirety of the Dark Pictures Anthology series will come to PC, PS4 and Xbox One. The first story, *Man Of Medan*, is due to launch early 2019.

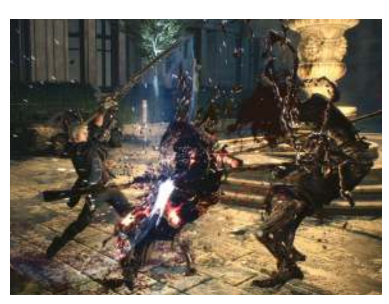
SO, HOW DOES IT PLAY?
To be honest, it plays a hell of a lot like *Until Dawn*. The mechanical design is very familiar, with you charged with guiding a singular character around specific environments looking for key contextual clues or prompts as the camera shifts cinematically around you. It's simple, but effective.

HOW DOES IT LOOK?
Pretty damned incredible. The visual fidelity is deep and detailed, bordering on photo-realistic – the lighting in particular left a long-lasting impression. The body, face and voice capture was among some of the best that we've seen in the industry. What we're trying to say is this, even without the Decima engine used for *Until Dawn*, this is one bloody good-looking game.

IS IT FUN TO PLAY?
We will have more on *Man Of Medan* in the future, but suffice to say that we enjoyed what we had the opportunity to play. It was frequently thrilling and effortlessly built tension into its claustrophobic corridors. If our demo is any indication of the final quality of *Man Of Medan*, then we're in for a mighty good (see also: terrifying) time.



"YOU HAVE TO LAY WASTE TO THE DEMONIC LEGIONS OF THE UNDERWORLD AND LOOK GOOD WHILE YOU'RE DOING IT"



THE DANTE OF IT ALL

Here's what we know so far, Dante is playable in *Devil May Cry 5* and he looks like an aging badass. It isn't much, but at least it's something. 'Rebellion Dante', as he has come to be known in certain circles, is yet to be shown properly in action in a gameplay sense, but we have caught a small glimpse of the legendary figure. He's older, grizzled and no less joyous towards the prospect of hunting demons. Dante, it would seem, also has a few new tricks up his sleeve; not only can that bike he's tearing around on be used as a weapon (because of course it can) but it also looks to be a Devil Arm of sorts, with Dante able to split the chassis in two and dual-wield the parts as giant chainsaws. And yes, of course it can be quickly snapped back together mid-combo. It's ridiculous, but it's also pretty damned awesome. We'd expect nothing less.



IN BRIEF

Devil May Cry is back and business is good. Nero, Dante and a mysterious third playable protagonist are here to save the world all over again

EXPERIENCE NERO'S VINDICATION IN DEVIL MAY CRY 5

→ WE GET OUR HANDS ALL OVER ONE OF THE BEST ACTION GAMES TO ARRIVE IN YEARS

FORMAT: **PS4, PC, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM** | DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | RELEASE: **TBC 2019** | PLAYERS: **1**

Looking back at it now, it's no surprise that *Devil May Cry 4* didn't deliver in the way some of us expected it to. This is a series that wants you to lay waste to the demonic legions of the underworld and look good while you're doing it. You can't have a game so laser-focused on slaying in style with a protagonist that's so effectively un-chic. It just can't be done; our suspension of disbelief will only stretch so far. Capcom knows this. It might not publicly admit it, but *it knows*.

It may have taken a little over a decade for the company to deploy a suitable response to the criticism levied at it oh so long ago but – and, please, allow us the time to assure you of this – it sure has offered up one hell of a response. Legendary game director Hideaki Itsuno is back in the saddle alongside as many members of the *Devil May Cry 3* & *4* dev teams as he could rustle up and the resulting experience is pretty damn stunning.

We know this because we recently had the opportunity to get our hands-on half an hour of *Devil May Cry 5*, playing, of course, as Nero. He's the big question mark hanging over all of this though, isn't he? Well then, let's go ahead and clear this up right now. Capcom has achieved the impossible here; it has only gone and made Nero a badass.

He's got style, he's got flair and he's got buckets of bravado. He has been transformed from a whining Dante wannabe to the flippant, arrogant anti-hero we always believed he could one day become. It just feels right. DMC has always propagated the idea that combat style should be a reflection of the character wielding the comically oversized broadsword, and in that sense *DMC5* absolutely nails it.

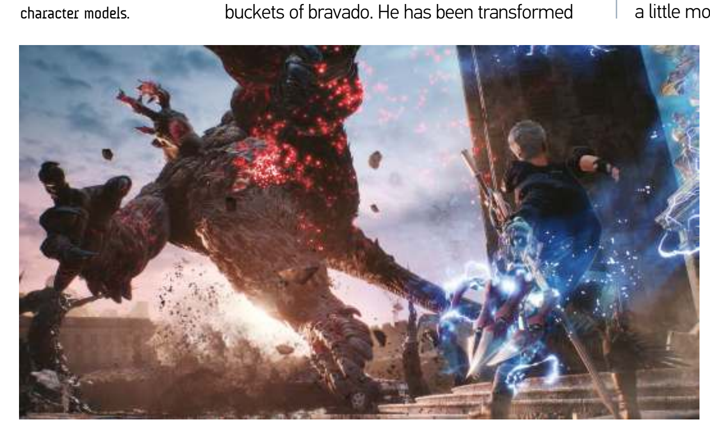
This change in attitude extends well beyond Nero's glow up – we're calling it now, Nu Metal circa '99 – but to his prowess in combat too. Regardless of whether he's slashing up enemies across the streets of London with the Red Queen or blasting holes through demons from a distance with the Blue Rose, the interplay between sword and gunplay feels absolutely fantastic. Juggling enemies is still the best way to raise your style meter – the music shifting in intensity as you begin to transition from Dire to Savage in seconds – although some will need time to readjust to the camera. It is now positioned far closer to the character than we've seen in previous DMC games, perhaps reflecting Capcom's intentions to modernise elements of the design to help it keep pace with current genre games.

Regardless, we never once felt lost in the action, nor did we struggle to track enemies in amongst the chaos, be it using the manual lock-on feature or the auto-aim functionality we found hidden away in a menu.

You may have noticed that Nero is missing a little more than his luscious bleach blonde locks this time around, he's also had that demonic left arm of his amputated. With the Devil Bringer MIA, Nero has taken to unleashing an array of powerful attacks via prosthetics that plug into the socket, each offering an array of different utility options in combat. The Overture fires off an electric wave dealing AOE damage while something called the Gerbera gifts Nero more aerial manoeuvrability, perfect for getting above enemies before unleashing a variety of powerful airborne combos. You'll also be able to use a grappling hook of sorts to let Nero reel himself into larger enemies or, as we certainly enjoyed doing on occasion, using it to quickly cycle between smaller threats for maximum carnage. The speed in which you can inflict punishing amounts of damage between so many enemies is dizzying.

But that is *DMC5* all over, a game that revels in the spectacle of ridiculous demon-destruction. Running at a smooth 60fps (all hail the RE Engine) the action felt fantastic, regardless of whether you're facing off against groups of enemies or in contained boss battle scenarios. We aren't going to lie to you, it felt familiar, but then that isn't anything to turn your nose up at. There are few games these days that dare present a patchwork of stylish combat and fast-paced movement together as DMC does. To see the series back in action, firing on all cylinders, has us practically feverish waiting for 2019.

Above: *Devil May Cry 5* has been a long time coming and Capcom is treating its return with care. The action is as fast, stylish and bold as you'd imagine it would be, with an array of new combos and abilities helping to freshen up the combat.
Left: You'll notice that *Devil May Cry 5* looks different to previous games in the series, and that's because Capcom is making full use of the ever-impressive RE Engine – used for both *Resident Evil 7* and *Resident Evil 2* – to introduce a more photo-realistic world and new character models.





The character detailing in this game looks outstanding, much as it has done for the Yakuza series for many years now. This team knows how to get amazing things out of its engine and create some stunning urban landscapes as well.

JUDGE EYES MIGHT JUST BE YAKUZA MEETS PHOENIX WRIGHT

→ TOSHIHIRO NAGOSHI LOOKS AT THE SEEDY SIDE OF TOKYO FROM ANOTHER ANGLE

FORMAT: **PS4** | PUBLISHER: **SEGA** | DEVELOPER: **RYU GA GOTOKU STUDIOS** | RELEASE: **TBC 2019** | PLAYERS: **1**

The Yakuza team does what it does. It doesn't seem to care very much about the vagaries of the industry at large or the trends that come and go with each passing breeze. It makes a unique brand of open world, narratively driven action games and *Judge Eyes* (alternately referred to as *Project Judge* in some materials) looks to be sticking pretty firmly to that formula while varying some of the structure.

Where Yakuza has focused squarely on the criminal underground and the honour (or lack of) among thieves, *Judge Eyes* places you in the shoes of private investigator Takayuki Yagami who is hot on the heels of a Tokyo serial killer. Much like recent Yakuza games, there's some incredible character animation and facial capture being utilised in this game with lead actor Takuya Kimura providing his likeness as well as over 1,000 minutes of voice recording to the character. Kimura has apparently been quite involved in the development of the character with the Sega team, helping to bring some of his dramatic experience to the role.

Below: As a private investigator you'll likely have a lot of missions that involve tailing people and capturing photographic evidence of their misdemeanours to hand off to the police or other interested parties. You'll actually have a drone for just those purposes in some missions.



The core mechanics of the game seem as idiosyncratic as you would expect from this team. The combat is about as savage and over the top as what you will have experienced from Yakuza, possibly with even more flair and insanity thrown in. There's a moment in one trailer, for instance, where Yagami kicks an assailant sitting in a car from outside while performing a kick-flip with a skateboard. The flipside of the experience is Yagami's work as an investigator and how he navigates the opposing worlds of crime and law enforcement. This is where some of the Phoenix Wright comparisons begin to appear as you look at crime scenes, put together clues, talk with victims and suspects, and piece together events to complete a case.

IN BRIEF

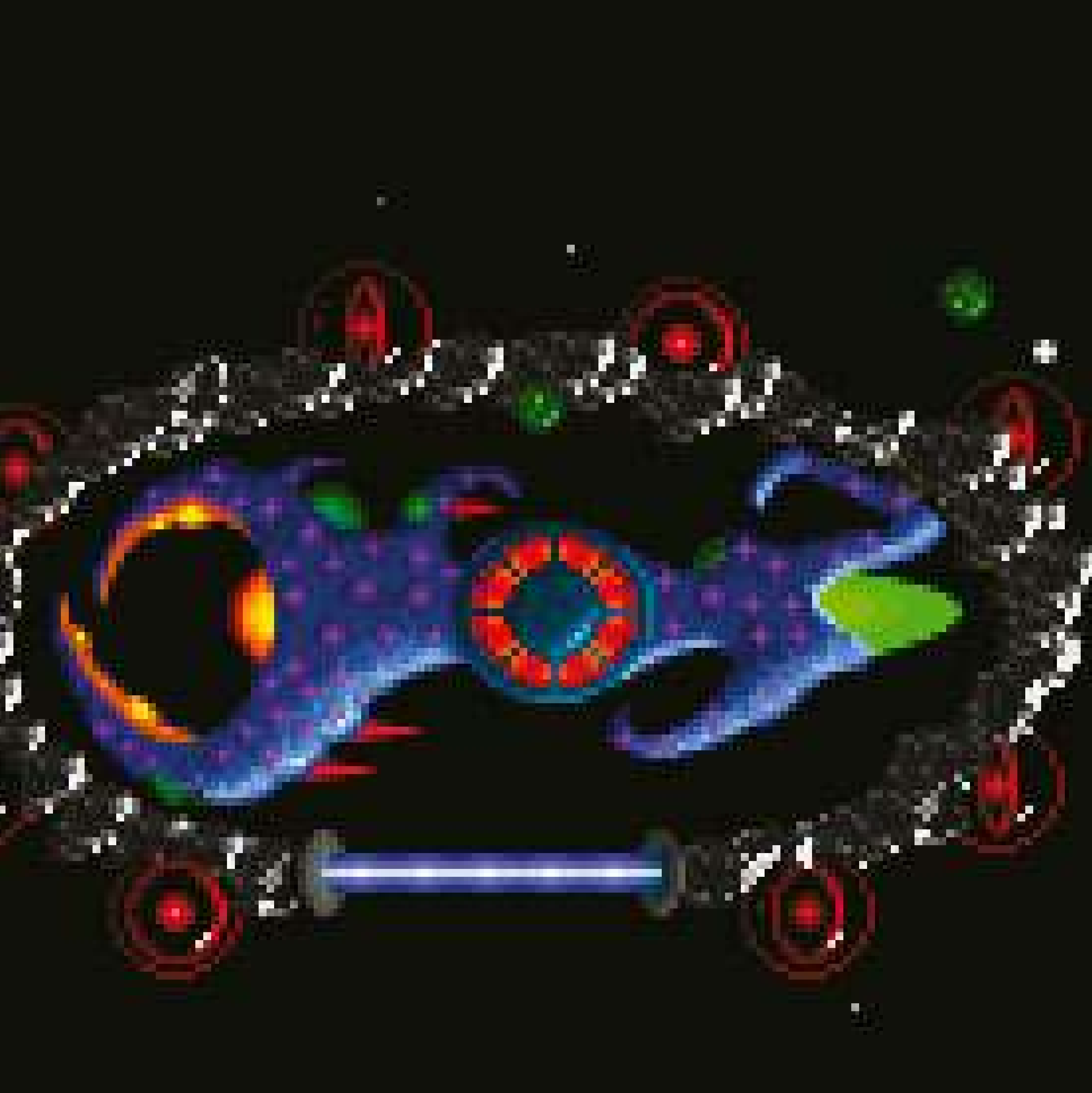
There's a serial killer on the streets of modern Tokyo and you must investigate the murders, but what other shady actions will you uncover?

There's a very particular flavour to the Yakuza games and it looks very likely that if you've enjoyed any of those then this will give you something just a little different to get into. Perhaps more exciting though is that with its new viewpoint and characters, this could be a great reset point for newcomers to join the party and experience this style of game for the first time. No one makes them like this besides Ryu Ga Gotoku Studios.



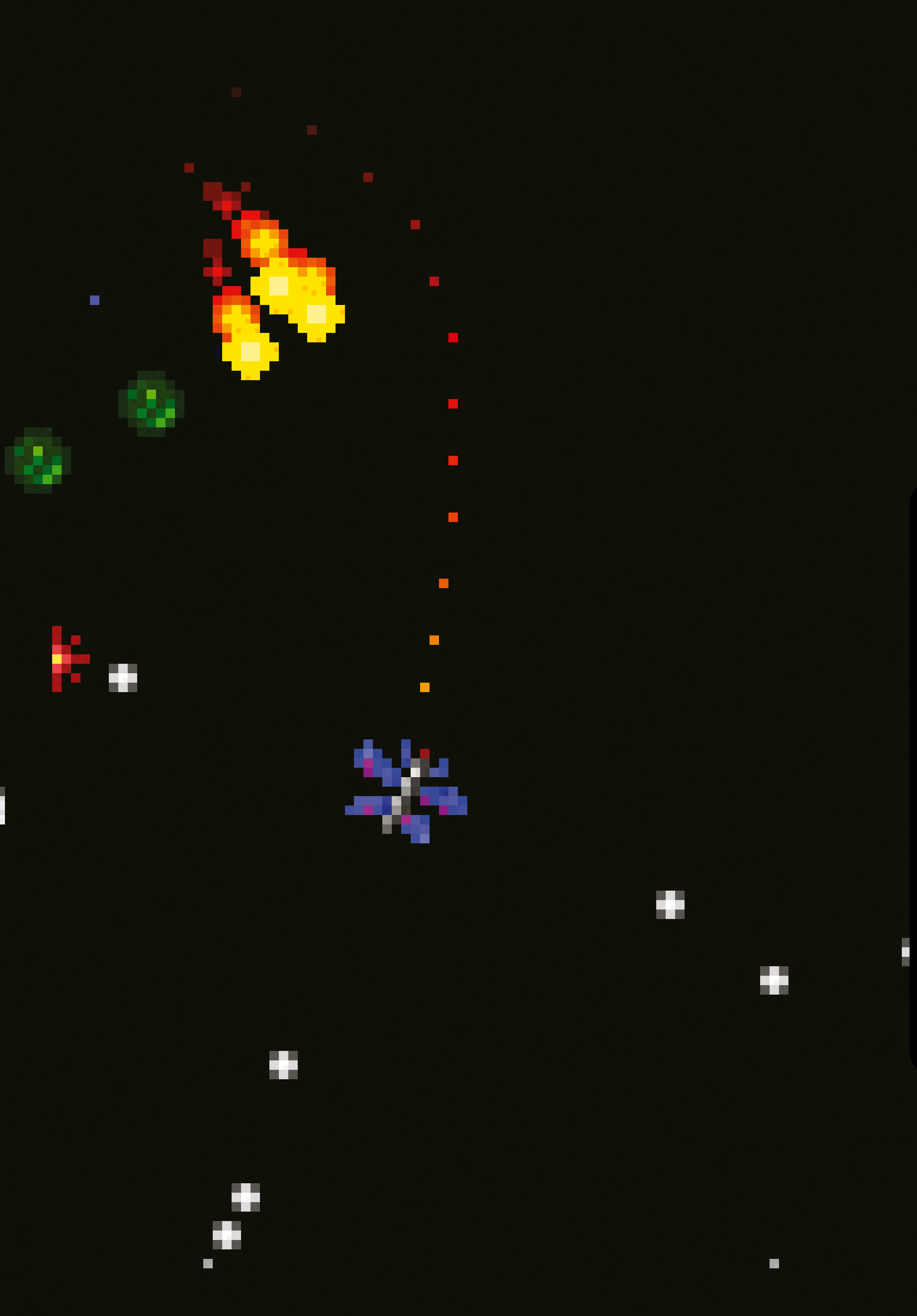



Valthirian Arc
Hero School Story
Good work, Principal. Not bad for your first official mission, eh?
Kayla
Become the greatest principal
Train your students
Build your own academy
PS4
PlayStation 4 - September 28
Switch & PC - October 2
Agaté
pqube



"It felt like this entire universe had opened up to me"

MIKAEL KASURINEN, GAME DIRECTOR, REMEDY



WHY I ♥...

STAR CONTROL 2

MIKAEL KASURINEN,
GAME DIRECTOR, REMEDY

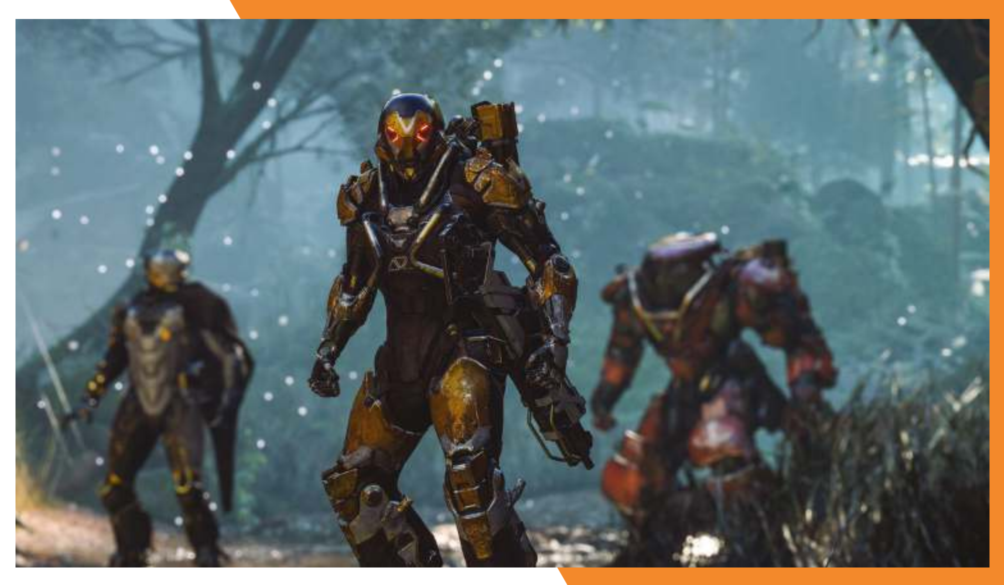
I think my favourite game of all time is Star Control 2*. That game was mind blowing for me, back when I played it for the first time. It felt like this entire universe had opened up to me, where I could go wherever I wanted to and do whatever I wanted to do. There was progression to it as well, where I could build my own ship; the combat deceptively simple, but it was actually very complicated. To me it was a perfect combination of action, adventure and exploration… oh, and the storytelling! You could have dialogue with all of the different space races and I had never seen anything like that in games before, I didn't even know you* could *do anything like that in games.*


TAKING

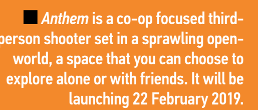


FLIGHT

WE SIT DOWN WITH BIOWARE'S JON WARNER TO DIVE INTO ANTHEM, THE STUDIO'S ATTEMPT TO TELL A DIFFERENT TYPE OF STORY







Anthem is a co-op focused third-person shooter set in a sprawling open-world, a space that you can choose to explore alone or with friends. It will be launching 22 February 2019.

"For me, *Anthem* really represents that next evolutionary step." So says BioWare game director Jon Warner as we sit down after an exhilarating hands-on session. As far as the Canadian studio is concerned, this is how it steps forward into its future, but *Anthem* could well be more than that. The way in which it is merging narrative design and online mechanics could in fact light the path for the next evolution of multiplayer gaming. We've been enthused by *Anthem* from the moment it was revealed at E3 2017, but our extended hands-on experience with the game has made us confident that while it might be compared to the likes of *Destiny* or *The Division*, *Anthem* is entirely its own animal.

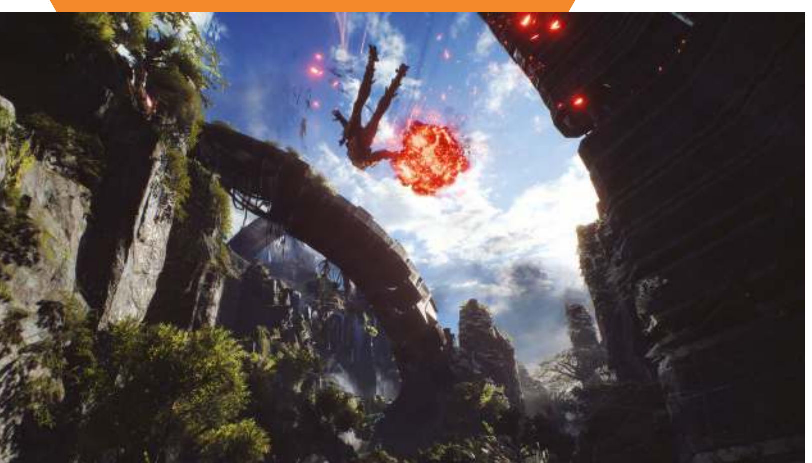
Evolution can be messy, however. Progress, advancement and innovation are the lifeblood of the videogame industry, but there will always be missteps and BioWare has made its share over the years. Whatever the failures, the false starts and the pitfalls, however, evolution is essential to growth for a studio like this.

What stands out above all else is that this is BioWare's vision and every facet of its experience is being brought to bear, not so that it can keep making the games of the past, but so that it can lead the charge into a new future. *Anthem* is different from what has come before, but it carries with it the core values of BioWare.

"I think that if you look at all of our games, starting with *Baldur's Gate*, and then looking forward, you'll see that there is an evolution of our storytelling technique going on," Warner tells us, a sentiment that has been at the heart of what BioWare has been trying to define here over *Anthem*'s five years of development. Through titles like *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age*, BioWare has established a signature approach to storytelling. It's one that utilises a core cast of unique characters to drive you deeper into a central narrative, an all-encompassing single-player experience that, despite being clearly authored, is presented in such a way that you feel as if you have authority over its direction. Of course, BioWare knows that this isn't the only way that it can leverage storytelling to invest a player in a world and its characters.

Anthem may run counter to your perception of what a BioWare game could or should be, but the game actually looks to retain its ties to the studio's legacy in a number of ways that may surprise you. This is a game with a clear focus on co-operative gameplay, one that emphasises exciting adventures and spectacular battles within a gorgeous shared world occupied by other human players. It took just a few minutes with *Anthem* for it to click into place with us, for us to understand that this is BioWare's classic approach to world building applied across an all-new canvas.

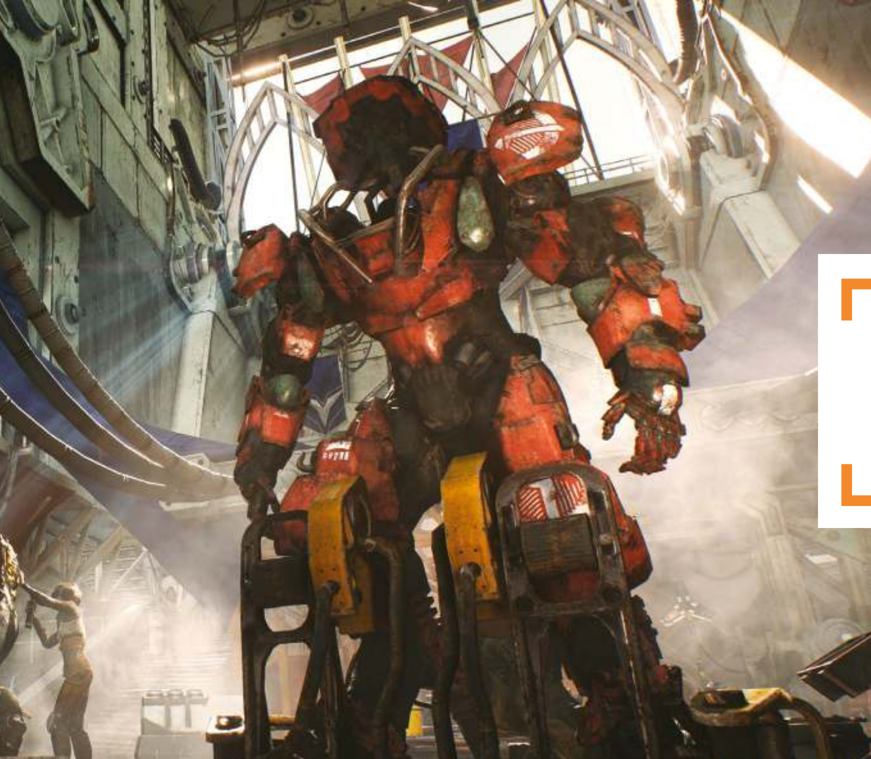
"You should probably start thinking of it in two streams," Warner suggests. "There is a more traditional story, which features the freelancers versus The Dominion – it's a very well crafted story with a beginning, middle, and end. Then there's the story that goes on in the world; *Anthem* is a world that was left undone by its creators, the gods left it and it has become super dangerous. That's not a conflict we will ever solve and so it's a platform to tell endless stories on. That's the job that a freelancer has, and it will always be a job for a freelancer."



BioWare is eager to put the controversy of *Mass Effect: Andromeda* behind it, looking towards *Anthem* as a refresh of sorts for the studio. If any plans for single-player DLC had indeed been planned for *Andromeda*, they have now been put on hold as the studio puts its full weight behind its exciting new project.

There's still a main narrative thread that runs throughout the world, one that's driven by your relationships with a host of conflicted companions, although all of this is weaved throughout a shared open world in which other players and emergent events can help drive the construction of stories that BioWare never actively conceived. This is a BioWare game in which the story never needs to end, told in an environment that we are desperately eager to explore more of.

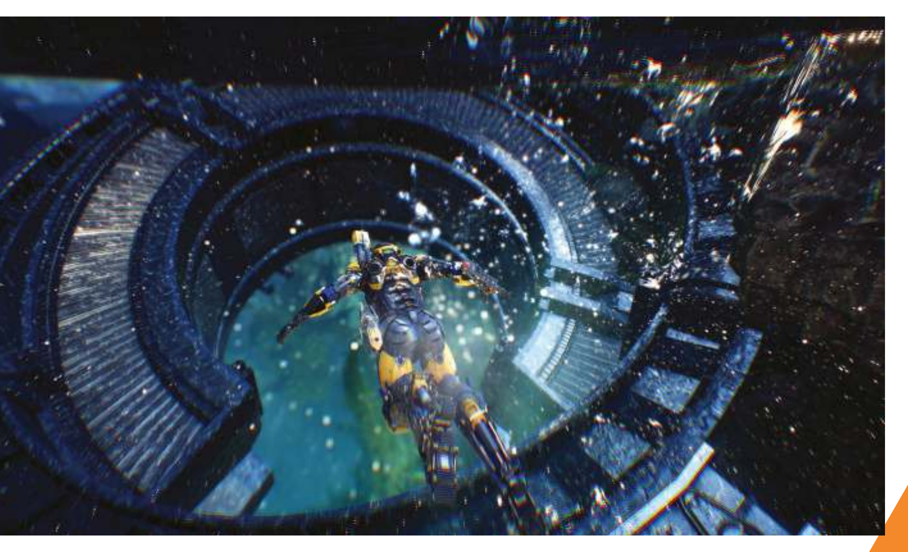
For the private story, the part that belongs to you and you alone, we have to look at Fort Tarsis, your base of operations that no other real-world player will ever step into and interrupt. Here is where you'll interact with your pit crew, build relationships with these core companions, learning more about them and defining your place within this story. Fort Tarsis is like the Normandy, only many times larger and more involved than anything we've seen from BioWare before. "It features into this idea that we had, it's 'our world, my story'," says Warner. "[Fort Tarsis] is a place where you get to be by yourself, with your NPC companions, and really spend as much or as little time as you want digging into that side of the game. Then you can go out into the open world, that's where the missions are, and you can just freely explore it."



"THAT'S NOT A CONFLICT WE WILL EVER SOLVE, SO IT'S A PLATFORM TO TELL ENDLESS STORIES ON"

Fort Tarsis is also where you'll really get to dive into the lore of this world and get a sense of what is driving your story forward. It is, in some respects, also the emotional core of the experience. You'll see the hardships that the people of this planet are experiencing, how the half-built and broken nature of it has influenced the development of its population. BioWare has said that the plots of the various agents handing out missions will be begging to cross over with one another, not least because they often serve different factions with competing interests. As large as Fort Tarsis is, it's actually a quite tightly knit community when you get down to it, it would appear. Most interesting to us, we should expect Fort Tarsis itself to change and develop as you take on missions with the different factions, allowing you to have a real impact on this personal space in an otherwise shared experience.

But, this being a BioWare game, as impressive as the world building is visually, it's equally as impressive in terms of story and mechanical reasoning. While *Anthem* is being built as a playground for your imagination, it's a playground built on a fictional world that has its own set of rules. The story of this place, of the Shapers who left this world unfinished, and the 'Anthem of Creation' that is both the cause of so much trouble and the power that everyone appears to covet, is all threaded through the mechanics and design of what exists within the world. A great example of this is the Javelins, the exoskeleton suits at the heart of the game. Suits that not only facilitate *Anthem*'s incredible, exhilarating action, but feel perfectly reasoned within the fiction of this world.



"This isn't a world of mass production, there aren't big factories that are cranking out Javelins and weapons," Warner reveals, giving us some insight into the ways in which BioWare has sought to weave lore throughout every aspect of *Anthem*'s creation. "It's more of a society that's built around craftsmanship. A Javelin is actually hand crafted like an old school Rolls Royce. It's actually hand built. So, the weapons needed to feel substantial and chunky. We started from that space, and it was a really nice marriage between design and sound, arriving at that place where the Javelins just felt powerful and good to wield."

This in turn, according to Warner, was born from how the game itself was originally conceived, as a small group within BioWare began to concept the new IP after wrapping work on *Mass Effect 3*. "Broadly thinking about it, we knew we wanted to do something that's open world, we knew we wanted to do something that was more social, and so as we started thinking of ideas, we let that be our guiding principle, and arrived at this interest in this," he explains. "We knew that we wanted to create »



■ *Anthem* is at its best when played cooperatively with friends, the Javelin suits combining in combat seamlessly to create some truly spectacular battles against the enemy forces that occupy the world.



CLASS WARFARE

AN OVERVIEW OF THE JAVELIN SUITS THAT WILL MAKE UP YOUR SQUAD AT LAUNCH

RANGER

TYPE: BALANCED

A versatile, all-purpose Javelin designed to be adequate at fulfilling multiple combat roles.

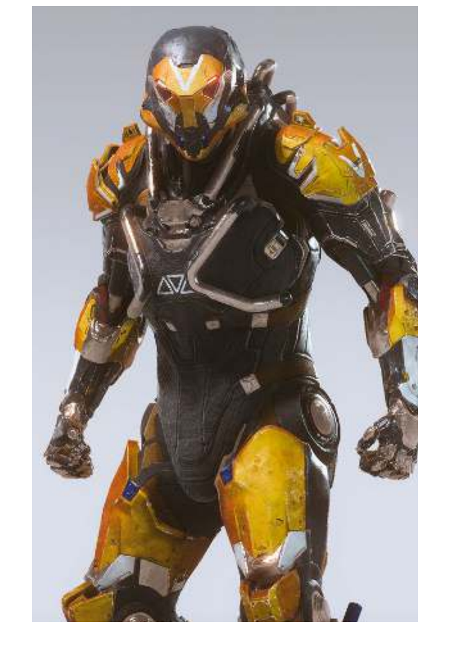
ULTIMATE

MULTI-TARGET MISSILE BATTERY

A powerful volley of micro-missiles that can target and obliterate dozens of enemies at a time with truly devastating concussive force.

INFO

Ranger is the first Javelin that each Anthem player will get their hands on and it will be used throughout the opening missions. This class inherits a variety of attributes from the other three Javelin models available at launch. It's fast and precise, but doesn't necessarily allow you to specialise in any one discipline.



COLOSSUS

TYPE: HEAVY

A walking tank, this heavy Javelin that can use its overwhelming strength to dominate close-quarters combat.

ULTIMATE

SIEGE CANNON

This is to be used to decimate a powerful foe from the field quickly, dealing disgusting amounts of damage to a single target.

INFO

Colossus is for those players that favour heavy firepower and close-quarters viability at the sacrifice of speed. The heavy construction of the suit's chassis means it has superior armour and is best used to deal high-damage combos in conjunction with the other Javelins.



STORM

TYPE: MAGE

This Javelin uses elemental force to deal out damage from afar, working best when weaving through the air keeping distance from direct encounters.

ULTIMATE:

TBC

EA is yet to detail the Storm's super ability, but given that this suit's focus in around a command of kinesis abilities we imagine it'll be quite spectacular.

INFO:

Storm is designed for those that want to bring focus and balance to a squad. This suit will let you wield elemental power, maintain an agile low-level hover through the manipulation of kinetic energy and even teleport between short spaces to evade danger, although it does come with minimal armour protection to compensate for its massive utility on the field.



INTERCEPTOR

TYPE: ROGUE

This Javelin suit is designed for those that love to cause problems, using speed to cripple and confuse groups of enemies.

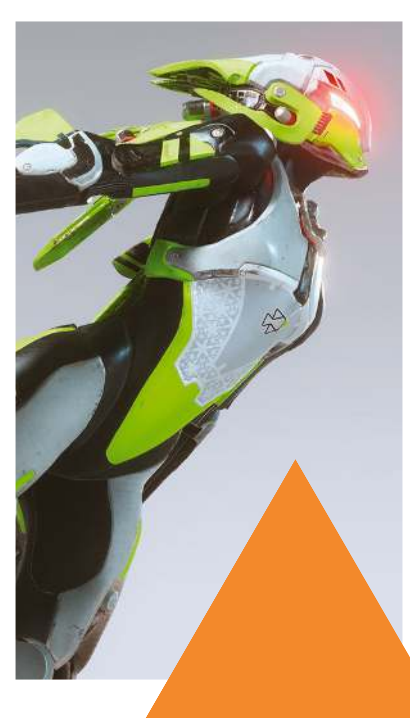
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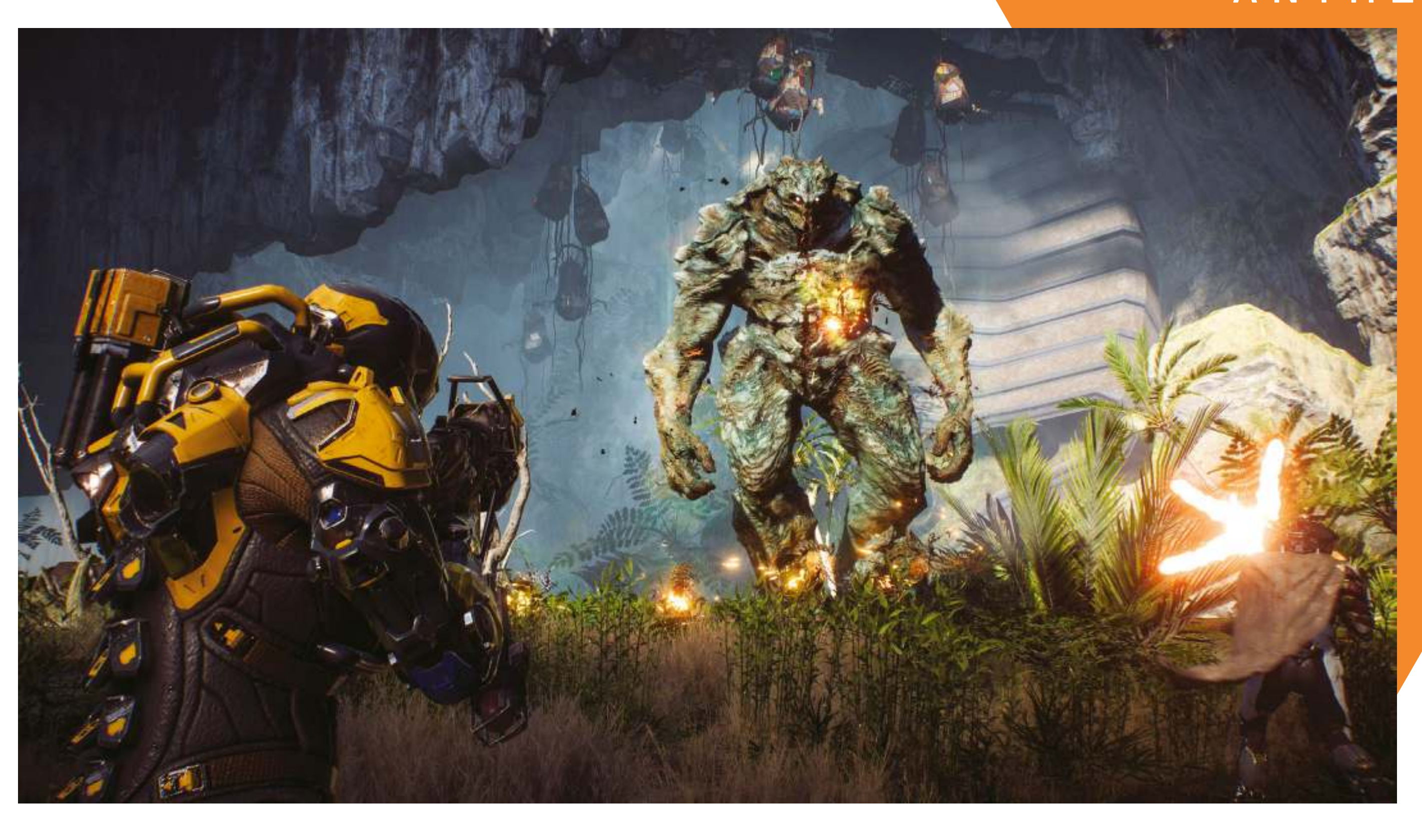
TBC

EA has been keeping all details of the Interceptor close to its chest and as such, it is yet to reveal much more than its mere existence.

INFO

The Interceptor excels in getting in close to enemies, inflicting maximum damage, and then whipping away before they can react. It comes equipped with a variety of offensive and defensive capabilities, designed to let you support your squad mates in a number of different ways. It isn't the strongest and it has little in the way of armour, but the Interceptor has unrivalled agility and evasion – a suit for players that have mastered the basics.





■ There will be areas of *Anthem*'s open world that will be simply too dangerous for you to explore at the beginning of the game. Powerful enemies such as the Titans can only be tackled by experienced groups of freelancers.

a world environment that was proportionally very large, compared to humans. And we started thinking about how are we gonna traverse it, and what kind of tools we were gonna give to players. It was a really natural kind of thing, 'man, we should allow players to fly'. So our team put together a really quick prototype, and as soon as you tried it, you were like, 'Oh, yeah, this is fun.' Then it was just refinement, endless refinement and iteration to get it to just feel so good."

And that refinement process has paid off, because there really is nothing else quite like the experience of piloting a Javelin in this world. If we had to force a comparison, it might be to the swinging mechanic in *Spider-Man*, but only in the sense that both manage to create a feel and momentum that is like a perfection of something so many have tried before. Warner puts a large part of it down to how the camera is being used as well as the tight flight controls, because when the camera was wrong, motion sickness could become an issue. "It's not on the game and character, and the controls to feel right, it's got to be about the camera as well," he tells us. "Yeah, there were iterations where I would pick up the controller and say 'I can't play'. So yeah, it was a challenge."

That's one challenge that we are happy that the studio took on and was able to overcome. The Javelin suits set *Anthem* apart from the competition with ease.

The freedom of movement you are granted across *Anthem*'s sprawling open world is exhilarating; the degree of precision you are granted over the control of your suit, be it in air or on land, is incredible, particularly as you are able to move at breakneck speeds. While we were given limited opportunity to go off and explore, we gained a clear sense that this is going to be a world – be that on our own or in the company of other freelancers – that we are going to devote many an hour to whipping across in search of secrets and understanding.

At this stage, we're still yet to see the true extent of just how large this open-world is, but given the ways we are being given to explore this entrancing space we get the feeling we are yet to even scratch the surface. A particular highlight is how you can transition seamlessly from flying through the air to propelling yourself through water.

"YOU'LL NEVER JUST GO OUT ON LIKE A MISSION AND SEE OTHER PEOPLE FLYING AROUND"

"It's shocking, isn't it?" Warner considers. "You know, honestly, I think that we, as gamers, have kind of been accustomed to, or trained to think of our worlds as tabletops. So, as you're running across it, and you come to water, and you get in water, it's like oh yeah, I get that.

"But when you add this extra verticality to it, and there's now a weird transition between the two, it's just like why weren't we doing this before."

Of course, the other core pillar of the moment-to-moment gameplay that is going to be of paramount importance is the feel of the combat, something that has been somewhat illusive for BioWare in the past. However, with that hand-made feel being strived for throughout the weapon design, the studio may finally have cracked it. While the speed and precision of the Javelins may imbue navigating the open world with a sharp sense of immediacy, this also extends out into each of the combat scenarios we find ourselves flying into contact with. The verticality of the maps helps bring a new dimension to battles, ensuring that it always feels as if you are on the verge of being completely overwhelmed by enemy forces.

We are able to meet each emerging threat head on thanks to each Javelins manoeuvrability and capacity for smart interplay between weapons systems. Each of the four suits available at launch – each effectively taking on a different standardised class role – come with a variety of different weapons and suit abilities, and these can be combined in combat to create spectacular scenes of large-scale destruction that's as pleasing to the eye as it is crippling to enemy »

■ Each of the Javelin suits comes equipped with an array of unique powers and weapons, each of which can be customised and personalised as you progress through the main story and take to exploring the world.

defences. Interestingly, BioWare has designed its combat systems in such a way that it doesn't necessarily require players to be in constant communication to get the most out of this side to the game – an instinctual reaction to the fact that many console players have long-abandoned their microphones, even in co-op driven experiences.

Each Javelin suit is a force to be reckoned with, but should a team focus fire on the same group of enemies the small-arms weapon fire and more impressive abilities will combine naturally. It encourages players to work together as the result of doing so is clear and immediate. It feels like a welcome answer to some of the problems that continue to crop up in other genre games. When we said that the Javelin suits set *Anthem* apart from the competition before, we weren't kidding around. "There's an interesting variety of [weapon combinations], and one of the interesting things is how that actually flows. It doesn't require a great deal of coordination," Warner tells us. "Which is nice, because it really speaks well of the flow of the game. But then as you're really going after more difficult and sophisticated content in the game, and you are having that nice, tight coordination, you can get some really spectacular results."

It doesn't seem like too much of a stretch to say that BioWare is hoping for a similarly pleasing reaction in how it combines the online and solo adventure experiences of *Anthem* together.

While Fort Tarsis is the hub for something close to a traditional BioWare role-playing experience, the open spaces of the planet beyond its protected walls are where the emergent chaos of multiplayer and co-op can take hold. It's a space where you can spend time with friends and share the adventures you find or meet up with new players and assist in their journeys. Importantly, it's down to you to decide as to how you want to approach that.

"You'll never just go out on like a mission and see other people flying around," explains Warner. "If you go into the world in free play, you might encounter strangers who are just out there, but you don't have to hang out with them. If you want to be playing with other players, but maybe your friends aren't online, when you start a mission, other freelancers who would be able to see you, you open up the world map, and you can actually see what other people are attempting to do, and you can just say, "Oh, I see. I wanna join that." And people can join you midway to give you reinforcement help. Once you're done with that kind of experience, you split apart."

In this respect BioWare is reaching into a new skill set, testing itself against something more complex and convoluted than before, but we wondered if that might almost be quite refreshing. "Yeah, it is, it's very refreshing, it's invigorating," Warner enthuses.

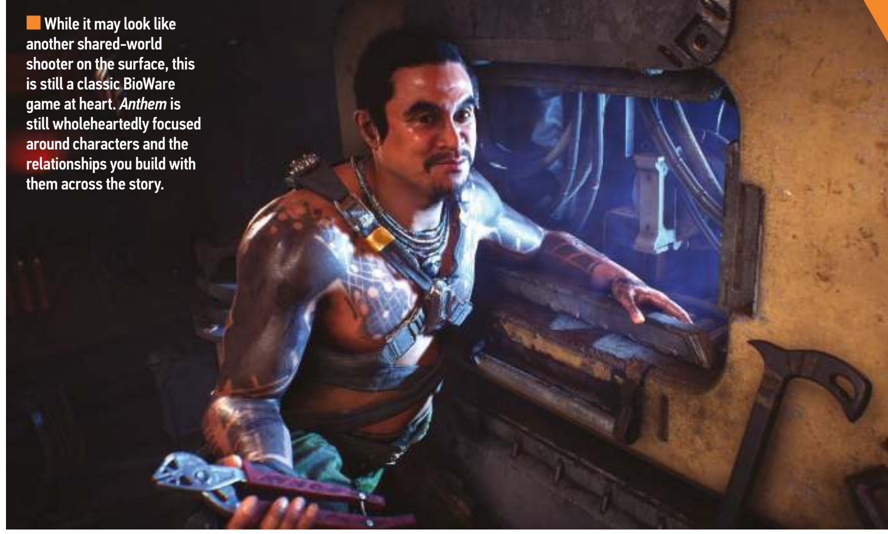
"And usually, when you talk about a *Mass Effect*, or a *Dragon Age*, people invariably end up talking about the plots or the points, and it's very refreshing, when people talk about *Anthem*, they talk about flying or fighting monsters, or the gear, the Javelins, and it's been a great opportunity for us to put gameplay first."

It's also interesting to note that while open world and online gaming aren't considered to be in BioWare's wheelhouse, the studio isn't entirely without experience in these fields. *Mass Effect 3*'s multiplayer has often been cited as an important influence on the direction of *Anthem* as well as a relatively underrated element of that game's release, while the Austin team has been able to pass on its best knowledge of maintaining a live game experience. "Our team in Austin, working on *The Old Republic*, they have a lot of experience doing this," Warner agrees. "So, it's really just leveraging different team members to get the right expertise."

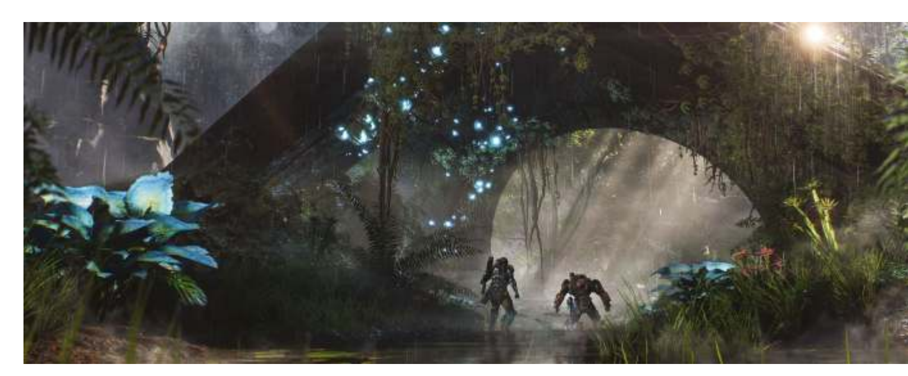
In terms of developing a live world narrative, probably the best example of the form right now if Epic's *Fortnite*. While it's quite clearly playing in the burgeoning Battle Royale space, *Fortnite*'s ability to leverage an ongoing story throughout its seasons of content – of its introduction of new elements to a single map space that develops around the players without disrupting the core ethos of play – is clearly going to have influence all throughout this genre. Warner doesn't get too much into how *Anthem* will tackle shared world events,



We don't feel as if it is much of a stretch to claim that *Anthem* is going to be one of the best looking games of 2019. The studio is getting excellent results out of DICE's Frostbite engine.



While it may look like another shared-world shooter on the surface, this is still a classic BioWare game at heart. *Anthem* is still wholeheartedly focused around characters and the relationships you build with them across the story.





HOW PROGRESSION WORKS IN ANTHEM

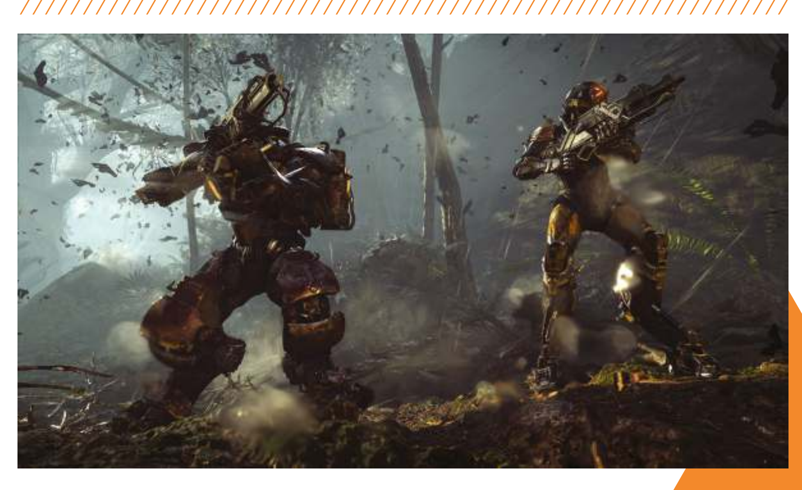
BioWare is keenly aware that you won't want to be wasting time levelling up four separate Javelin suits just to keep pace with your friends. While both your Pilot and Javelins are both individually upgradable and customisable, only one of these has a level tied to progression that you need to feed XP into to improve.

Your Pilot has its own level that will improve over the course of the game and, as you level up, you will receive points to upgrade elements of general suit usage such as the ability to fly for longer periods of time without overheating or to improve your mobility in combat.

You'll be able to freely switch between the suits as you please – before embarking on a mission from Fort Tarsis or your mobile base of operations, the Strider – bringing your Pilot progression to each of these suits as you do.

The Javelins themselves can be improved over the course of the game, but this is done through the acquisition of new gear and weaponry. Honing your loadout is a huge part of the progression in *Anthem*, particularly as you look to further craft each of these suits for specific mission types and co-op scenarios. BioWare has confirmed that gear drops out in the world scale to your Pilot's level, meaning that drops will always be battle ready, regardless of whether you're in the Ranger or the Interceptor.





but BioWare seems to be putting a plan in place, recognising how impactful those kinds of meta-stories can be to convincing us we should spend more time in the world. "We're looking at it as kind of a holistic experience, and making sure that we're paying attention to, and doing things that will engage players across the board," Warner says. "Everybody's got kind of a different motivation. Providing lots of interesting reasons to come back."

Importantly though, so much of this is up to us as players to engage with or not. Many BioWare fans have been drawn to the studio's work because it is about solo adventures and immersing yourself in a world. Whether or not that immersion will be broken by the presence of other players, we're not sure. From our experience, we suspect it will simply require a different flavour of suspension of disbelief to buy into it all. That all said, you can play solo if you want to. "You can choose to play through the campaign as single player," Warner confirms. "You go into your options and you set this for invite-only experience. And, you know, you can do that, and it's completely viable. But it really does shine and sing when you've got full support."

What we were pleased to discover more than anything playing *Anthem* was that for all that it is an evolution of what BioWare does, we could feel the roots of all of its greatest strengths reaching back. *Anthem* is a game that honours this studio's past achievements, but isn't weighted down by them. *Anthem* is a shared world delivered in a way that only this team could make it. "It's very important to us that we create immersive worlds, where you can have companionship, and where you get to be the hero of your own story," concludes Warner. "I think those elements are very much intact with *Anthem*. We're adding things to it, we're adding these interesting social storytelling elements to it. But, those moments, that companionship and strong characters, those are very much there."

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Fallout 76

And The Rise Of Survival Games

WHAT SHOULD BETHESDA LEARN FROM THE GROWING AND DIVERSE RANGE OF SANDBOX SURVIVAL PLAYGROUNDS THAT PRECEDE ITS LATEST OFFERING?

ONE OF THE THINGS WE LOVE ABOUT SURVIVAL GAMES IS THAT THEY TAP INTO THE CORE APPEAL OF PLAYING A VIDEOGAME IN THE FIRST PLACE; TESTING YOURSELF AGAINST THE SYSTEMS THAT A DEVELOPER HAS CREATED TO CHALLENGE YOU. Today that test is against thirst, hunger and fatigue, random encounters with enemy AI or the threat of other human opponents in a sparse open world setting, when previously the test would have been being able to leap from one block to another as fast as possible while avoiding a pursuing ghost. The value is ultimately the same even if the technology now is far more evolved and immersive in nature.

And so, in some respects, the rise of the survival game genre and its copious examples of the form in recent years should come as little surprise. It's the very epitome of the stripped, back to basics approach to game design that so many feel an affinity with. And while Bethesda's Fallout titles have tended to be much more involved and complex beasts, it also makes a lot of sense that this franchise would look to tap into that core appeal a little more and test itself in a new playground that can appeal to a different kind of gamer than its RPG fare has reached thus far.

For starters, Bethesda's foray into the survival experience, *Fallout 76*, comes pre-packaged with one of the most important things a good survival requires; an interesting world. "I think an interesting universe is as important as a good gameplay loop," 11 Bit Studios partnerships manager Pawel Miechowski tells us. "It makes things believable for the player even if we're talking about fantasy worlds." 11 Bit's recent survival offering, *Frostpunk*, was a little different from most since it brought together elements of survival with city management. However, what it shares with the wider Fallout universe is a post-apocalyptic world setting that pushes humanity to the edge.

The challenging moral aspect of survival in a unforgiving world is well established in Fallout and promises some interesting dilemmas in *Fallout 76* already, as we'll get into, but getting the world right and making it a place worth exploring and wanting to survive in is really so vital to making a good survival experience. There needs to be intrigue and beauty around every corner, as *The Long Dark* has been proving through its Early Access development.

"I think the environment design is of paramount importance to our experience, as *The Long Dark* is primarily about simply moving through the world and reacting to the simulation elements like wildlife and weather, as opposed to crafting or combat, which are the staples of most other survival games," says Raphael van Lierop, founder and creative director at Hinterland Studio. "Also, as a small independent studio launching a game into a crowded marketplace (like Early Access), it was critical that we find a way to stand out, and the best way to do that is create a visual style that is evocative and eye-catching. People see a screenshot or video and want to know more.

"Beyond that, I always wanted the game to be a visceral experience where the beauty of the environment stood in contrast to how harsh and demanding it would be. I think that paradox is very true to nature, and is very thematic to *The Long Dark*."

This was certainly one of the elements that has kept us coming back to *The Long Dark* since its initial launch in 2014 and an area where Bethesda is almost »

DayZ has recently come to Xbox One after a long wait, but has managed to remain vibrant and relevant in the survival genre for a long time now, which shows how important regular updates and community engagement can be.





"I THINK AN INTERESTING UNIVERSE IS AS IMPORTANT AS A GOOD GAMEPLAY LOOP"

Pawel Miechowski, 11 Bit Studios

a step ahead having brought some additional colour back into the wasteland with *Fallout 4*. What we've seen so far of *Fallout 76* promises an interesting mixture of pastures, forests and demonic beasts as the relatively untouched region of Virginia has fared well since the outbreak of war. Interestingly, it was actually playing Bethesda's *Fallout 3* that helped to inspire van Lierop and the creation of *The Long Dark*.

"I was inspired by my own purposeless wanderings in the Capital Wasteland of *Fallout 3*, where I found the exploration of a wrecked world tremendously compelling (as opposed to the combat and RPG aspects of that game, which felt like they detracted from the core exploration experience), games like *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* and *Half-Life* with their fantastically atmospheric worlds, and the long-term decision-making aspects of games like *King Of Dragon Pass*, where decisions you made today may not come to fruition (for good or ill) until far into the future," he explains to us. "Pulling these ideas together and setting them in a Canadian winter world in the aftermath of a geomagnetic apocalypse resulted in mechanics that are now seen to be 'genre staples' for survival games, but that's not how the ideas started – they were just an outcome of wanting to deliver a particular type of experience."

Of course Fallout has already made some moves in this direction in recent years when a Survival Mode update was made available for *Fallout 4*. Usurping the previous Survival difficulty setting, this mode introduced hunger, thirst, fatigue, a longer cycle on enemy and item spawning, removed fast travel, added weight to items like ammo and increased the effects of over-encumbrance. Saving was only possible



> "I WAS INSPIRED BY MY OWN PURPOSELESS WANDERINGS IN THE CAPITAL WASTELAND OF FALLOUT 3"
> **Raphael van Lierop, Hinterland Studios**



West Virginia offers Bethesda a relatively untouched region of US landmass for setting its game. With no massive cities, it is supposed that it would not have been devastated by nuclear fallout in quite the same way as Washington, Boston or Nevada.



through sleeping in a bed or sleeping bag, companions needed to be healed after encounters if they were knocked out and the effects of radiation and taking RadAway were also much more pronounced.

This really set the groundwork for how Fallout could work as a straight survival experience, although *Fallout 76* is trying something a little bit different again.

Bethesda has made it clear that this new game will be a survival-lite experience and while things like hunger, thirst, injury and illness will definitely play a role, fast travel is possible and the impact of environmental pressures will not be as drastic as in something like *The Long Dark*.

In many ways it really feels as if *Fallout 76* is drawing more from games like *DayZ*, having elements of PvE and PvP threatening us to different degrees and offering us very particular challenges. It begs the question, what does the team behind *DayZ*, recently release on Xbox One, think makes for a successful survival experience?

"The essential elements of a successful survival experience are, I think, based around what I call a 'meet the expectations' design," Bohemia Interactive lead producer Eugen Harton explains to us. "Usually, survival games are quite complex sandbox experiences – the systems need to be transparent and consistent in a way that you don't break immersion for the player who's trying to keep him/herself alive in dire situations. When you think of a solution as a player, you should be able to execute it and not fight the limitation of the game itself."

This really gets back to what we started out by saying about survival games and how they are about testing yourself against the systems a developer

Survival Of The Fittest
SOME MORE SURVIVAL STALWARTS LIGHTING THE WAY



ARK: SURVIVAL EVOLVED
Format: Multi

This heady mix of sci-fi tech with prehistoric creatures continues to be a popular test for survival game fans. Craft, loot and explore your way up the food chain and team up with other wanderers for some epic battles. *Ark* continues to deliver exciting new content and experiences.



SCUM
Format: PC

A new Early Access release that's getting a lot of attention, *SCUM* places you on an island as a convicted criminal left to fight for your life against other convicts for the entertainment of the public. It has crazy levels of customisation and measures things like metabolism.



SUBNAUTICA
Format: PC

Unknown Worlds Entertainment's offering leans more on exploration than survival as it drops you on an alien, water-dominated world and you are left to try and piece together a life for yourself. The ecosystem is stunning and the technology you can craft is really interesting.



NO MAN'S SKY
Format: Multi

Recently given a new lease of life with its *Next* update and launch on Xbox One, *No Man's Sky* is a great example of how a survival experience can grow and improve with the right updates and community feedback. It's now a much richer and involved experience.



DON'T STARVE
Format: Multi

One of the original breakout survival hits, *Don't Starve* has seen some interesting spin-off adaptations and remains one of the most challenging and varied survival games around even though it's essentially a 2D game playing against 3D competition. It just goes to show systems and mechanics mean more than graphics.

Conan Exiles seems to be offering the best example of the direction that *Fallout 76* is hoping to go in, offering survival, crafting, building, exploration, PvE and the option for PvP combat as well. Plus there's a growing modding community behind the game too.

has devised to challenge you. It's about immersion and emergent experiences and systems becoming interwoven with one another to create new and unique circumstances. Fallout under Bethesda has already shown itself to be capable of that through its RPGs and its roving monsters creating random challenges on the road, but that's driven by a narrative or our own curiosity to explore. In a survival game it needs to be more pressing and urgent or it needs to be about accumulation of strength and stability.

Fallout 76 seems to be moving in the later direction with a heavy emphasis on the crafting and building mechanics that were introduced in *Fallout 4*. In this respect *Conan Exiles* might seem to be a good comparison point for how to approach an experience that is actually equal parts survival, exploration and architect. "Gaming nowadays is, in big parts, about making memories," Funcom PR and community director Natascha Röösli explains to us. "Coming from a game developer background myself I feel that one of our biggest challenges and motivation is to find new ways to let people do exactly that; create their own unique memories. While we provide the world, the graphics, main assets and mechanics, we always wanted the game to be an opportunity for players to create and tell their own stories."

Funcom has taken this even further by opening up server control and allowing players to customise the world and create challenges for each other, but even within the base game there's plenty of room for innovation. "There are of course limits and rules but a lot of players think outside the box and have been pushing the system way beyond what we thought was possible," Röösli adds.

"One of my favourites still is a set of houses that a player built which is inspired by *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and consisted of hanging houses. We didn't even know it was possible to build that way."

Of course *Frostpunk* took some of that thinking in a completely different direction being a city survival sim. We ask Miechowski what he felt adding survival elements to the building experience of a sim brought to the game. "The goal becomes to survive, and especially in our game, to see what happens with people you rule over the course of survival," he says. "While in city-sim it's the endless building. The engagement comes from very different sources. In one you are challenged to achieve something extraordinary, or to overcome unusual hardships and become sort of an independent being, while in the other you build, you create and the fun comes from being an architect.

"You are a sort of modeller in city-sims and it really doesn't have anything to do with survival."

Fallout 76 seems to be sitting somewhere in the middle with its multiplayer aspects allowing for the building of a community, but still the pressures of basic needs having to be met and threats appearing from multiple directions, not least other roaming bands of players who might have their own plans. But that gets back to the core of a good survival experience, juggling all of these different mechanics and attempting to put out every fire as it fits you. It really takes the simulator experience of something like *Sim City* or more recently *Two Point Hospital* and brings it right down to the microcosm of your own body. And getting that juggling act right is really the key for both us as players and for developers.

"In general, unless a player falls to their death or decides to tangle with a bear when they are already very weak, most players die from a combination of things," van Lierop reflects of *The Long Dark*. »





While *Fallout 76* is certainly encouraging us to team up with friends, it can still be played as a solo Fallout experience. Bethesda's Pete Hines apparently plays it that way and the Lone Wanderer Perk Card even enhances that way of playing.





"The game really delivers a kind of 'death by a thousand cuts' model where it's how all the small things, the small decisions or the seemingly minor afflictions can stack up on you and then quickly become overwhelming."

It's still not entirely clear how *Fallout 76* is going to handle this balancing act and how stringent it's going to be, but we could certainly foresee it working well with things like limb specific injuries and illnesses already being well-established in the game engine. Getting crippled in one leg from a severe fall and hopping back to your base camp only to be set upon by bloatflies or radroaches. Then you're forced to used a radiated drink for some quick healing, but now you're poisoned and the threat is growing. These things can pile up, but you won't be losing progress in *Fallout 76* at least in the game's default server settings (we imagine tougher custom servers will be made available) and you'll respawn back at home in some state of health in the end.

The longer-term success of survival games is all about continued support and feedback, however, as Harton explains, "I think that variety (in approaches and solutions available to the player) is the key factor in keeping things engaging long-term. Expanding upon the variety of available content (either from the developers and/or community creations) to empower players creates this sort of commitment not seen in many other genres." We've already had confirmation from Bethesda that modding support will be made available post launch for *Fallout 76*, so that box is ticked, but there's an ongoing developer engagement needed too and that's been a key part in *DayZ*'s success according to Harton. "Since every game in the genre has its own unique twist to the formula, in general we attract certain niche communities. But the core issue remains a general one. Since many of the games in the survival genre have been developed under the Early Access model in this genre (more than any other genre), consistency of updates and attention to community issues are proven ways to retain a player base. If you can execute on your priorities properly, players will be happy."

And something like multiplayer, which adds a player-controlled and defined element to the experience can be another really helpful tool in keeping the experience fresh according to Harton. "There is only so much variation we can create as developers to keep the game interesting.

"Multiplayer and the ability to be confronted by other players (both directly and indirectly) stretches the systems in ways that we can't possibly achieve. As soon as a game becomes social, and has elements that require cooperation or multiple sessions to enjoy it, it is much more satisfying to play a game like that."

"Ensuring that players can filter for the kind of experience they are looking for is one of the biggest challenges we have, because ultimately their





The Long Dark has gradually been building itself up since 2014, continually adding new maps and content along the way, including a more involved story mode and all sorts of new threats. As a more purist survival game, death often comes from simple mistakes or oversights.





Frostpunk is a great example of how the life and death necessities of the moment can greatly impact and throw off any longer term planning you might have in a survival game. Getting from moment to moment will always take precedence, even if it ends up costing you your very ideals.

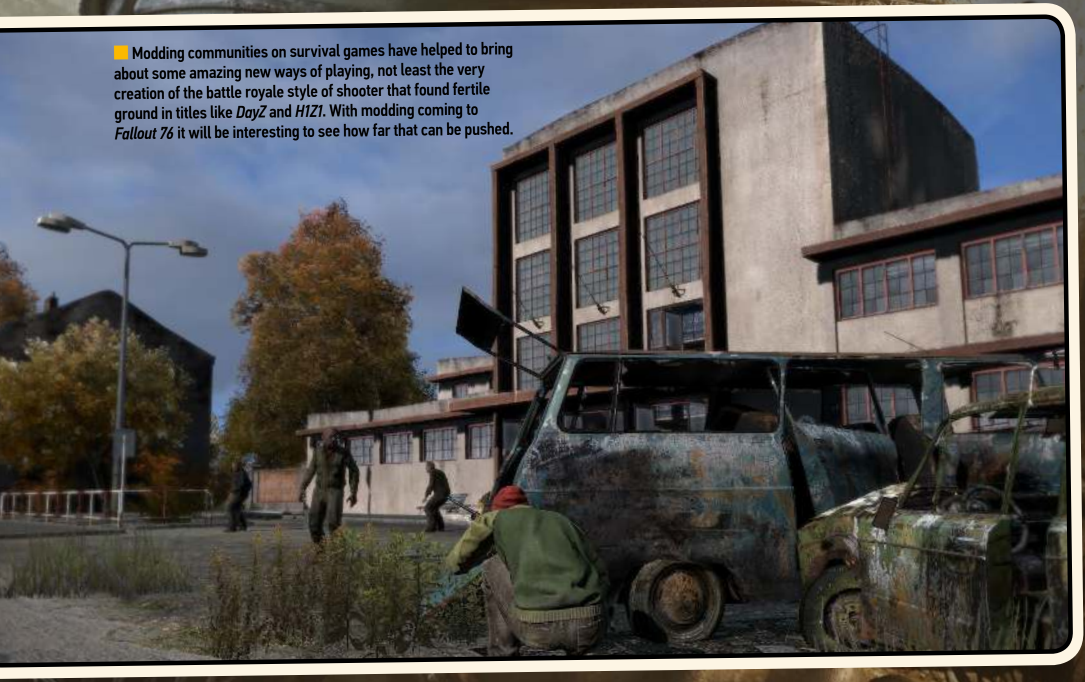
satisfaction will stem from how closely the game delivered on their hopes and expectations," adds van Lierop. The addition of multiplayer in *Fallout 76* has seen some backlash, even though many fans have wanted the ability to at least co-op their way through a campaign. Ultimately what has made survival games such a rich and fertile genre has been their versatility and willingness to embrace new challenges and concepts and it's good to see that Bethesda is doing that too. Just as important though is listening to player feedback.

"Since release we've already implemented several mechanics and features that were specifically brought to us by the community and we will continue to do so within our capability and manpower," Röösli tells us. "Having the player base giving us input but also help with testing on our TestLive servers is a privilege and one that we are very thankful for. A game like *Conan* simply can't exist without fan interaction. That doesn't only include positive feedback, which is of course very appreciated, but it's also important to get constructive feedback that we might not be so happy to hear."

There are so many flavours, styles and levels of difficulty, varying from games that aren't far short of walking simulators to punishing multiplayer experiences that demand every last ounce of your attention and ingenuity. What they have in common is the immediacy and sense of place they can evoke through the pressurised circumstances of survival and emergent story-telling. "I think survival games can create a stronger sense of connectedness between the player and their character in the world, and that sense of physical vulnerability is really attractive to certain types of players," van Lierop summarises. "So, there's a stronger element of immersion and personal attachment to the experience and outcomes that is hard to replicate in other types of games."

Fallout 76's journey into this field shows once again how versatile and adaptable the concept of a survival game can be. It's easily the biggest brand name to have ventured into these waters bringing with it a fanbase that has very particular expectations and hopes for what a Fallout game can deliver. But, if it can learn from some of the games we've talked about here it will be all the stronger for it because games like *DayZ*, *The Long Dark*, *Conan Exiles* and *Frostpunk* have been some of the most engaging we've played in years.





Modding communities on survival games have helped to bring about some amazing new ways of playing, not least the very creation of the battle royale style of shooter that found fertile ground in titles like *DayZ* and *H1Z1*. With modding coming to *Fallout 76* it will be interesting to see how far that can be pushed.

"AS SOON AS A GAME BECOMES SOCIAL, AND HAS ELEMENTS THAT REQUIRE COOPERATION OR MULTIPLE SESSIONS TO ENJOY IT, IT IS MUCH MORE SATISFYING TO PLAY A GAME LIKE THAT"

Eugen Harton, Bohemia Interactive



Perk Life

The way in which *Fallout 76* is adapting the classic Bethesda RPG formula into a survival experience is multi-faceted and involves adding some complexity to some systems while stripping back others. One interesting area of what looks like simplification is the S.P.E.C.I.A.L. system that is Fallout's version of levelling up and unlocking new abilities. *Fallout 76* introduces Perk Cards that can be spent on each of your S.P.E.C.I.A.L. skills (being Strength, Perception, Endurance, Charisma, Intelligence, Agility and Luck). Cards will be unlocked as your progress and survive in the game and then applied to each of your S.P.E.C.I.A.L. areas.

So, as you gain XP it can be applied to each of your S.P.E.C.I.A.L. skill areas, but this in and of itself does not unlock abilities. Those come from the cards you collect. If, for example, you find the Lone Wanderer Perk Card you'll see it applies to your Charisma and costs two points. So long as you have at least two points in Charisma it can be applied. If you have more points then additional cards up to that value can also be applied to Charisma. And this stretches across your S.P.E.C.I.A.L. abilities allowing you to stack abilities up and customise your loadout at any time.

What does this system add to Fallout? Well, it encourages more exploration for starters, forcing you out into the world in order to really become stronger and it also allows you to be more versatile and improvisational in your character customisation, which should come in handy when you team up with other players and look to balance your squad.





GAME DIRECTOR **MIKAEL KASURINEN** GUIDES US INTO THE HEART OF REMEDY ENTERTAINMENT'S WEIRDEST AND MOST AMBITIOUS GAME EXPERIENCE YET

DISCOVER A WORLD UNKNOWN

Ahead of seeing *Control* in action for the very first time, we were told by Mikael Kasurinen to expect the unexpected, that what we were about to witness would represent "the ultimate Remedy experience". It's common for developers to trudge out lines such as this when promoting such widely anticipated projects, but we would eventually understand this to be true. Though it wouldn't be in a way that we could ever have anticipated.

As the demo whirs into action you can feel it wash over you in an instant. A force beckoning you to look beyond that which you believe you can see, daring you to take a glance in a world of perspectives. *Control* posits that should you look beyond the frayed edges of your own reality, you might just see that which exists on the periphery. If you know the rules, if the conditions are right and should you understand the rituals, you too can keep travelling deeper into a world of unknowns.

We see this as Jesse Faden walks the Panopticon alone. She is looking for the same thing that we are – answers. She knows that she will need to fight for them eventually, but for now she is as we are, mesmerised by the path that winds off into the shadows. It is a corridor that seems to spiral in on itself indefinitely, an ecosystem of its own design within The Oldest House.

An exhibition of Altered Items adorns one of its walls. Hundreds of crucibles house hundreds of objects, each of them acted upon by forces that fit no known scientific paradigm. They take on an innocuous appearance, ones that we can at once recognise, though this only seeks to disguise and contort their true nature. Jesse's Service Weapon seems to pulse with knowing energy with every step that she takes.

Unit 75, a crucible that contains an Item resembling an ordinary household fridge, one that must have eyes on it at all times else it will *deviate* from this reality; Unit 76, a burnt-out vehicle that begs for our attention, though there is simply none left to offer it – a siren wails in the distance; it is time to move on. In time we reach Unit 715, home to an Item predisposed to causing Altered World Events, incidents that present the possibility of other dimensions existing upon our own. Its fortified doors have been pried open. Inside, bodies hang lifelessly, defying gravity. The warm cathode glow of the Benicoff TV draws us inside. As we do, bricks peel away from the foundations of the chamber, the room begins to reconfigure itself, transformed by our mere presence.

Jesse is the director of this domain. Jesse has no control over this domain. These facts have no symmetry; they are disconnected, but then everything feels that way here. We are inside of The Oldest House and nothing is quite as it seems. But the longer that we spend in its presence, the more we come to understand that this is exactly where we need to be. That this is where Remedy needs to be too, in a world of unknowns where its future will eventually take shape – even if our understanding of what that shape is exactly is purposefully contorted. "And you've only seen just a small part of it, of The Oldest House," Mikael Kasurinen later tells us with a knowing smile. *Control*'s game director is only too aware that the gameplay demonstration »



POWER OF THE MIND

HOW TELEKINESIS HAS INFORMED CONTROL'S WORLD DESIGN

Telekinetic abilities have been one of those ideas that always seemed like they would be perfect for games, but have very rarely been utilised to full effect. *Control* has placed Jesse's powers at the heart of how it is thinking about this game. "The first point I made was that this is a game about control; it's about controlling the environment and controlling elements. That's the main thing of the game. Telekinesis felt like a really natural first step towards that, establishing that as a key gameplay pillar. Jesse is essentially a telekinetic master and is able to use it to control the environment, use it to defend herself and to attack enemies and even able to use it to fly," game director Mikael Kasurinen explains. "It opened up a lot of interesting possibilities, but still with an elegant core idea, and of course that led to us thinking very carefully about how we built the environments, and also embracing new workflows – we have a more modular structure to the world, which allows us to add that layer of complexity and detail in the destruction of every single piece in the environment."

And so it is that virtually everything in the game world can be utilised by Jesse in her fight against the Hiss. "All of the chairs, tables, everything in the environment can be used as a weapon," Kasurinen continues. "And of course we have elements that are more complicated – take a fire extinguisher and throw it and it will blow and so on; we are now getting up to the point where you will be able to pick up enemies as well and throw them against each other. We are going as far as we possibly can with this kind of power fantasy of being this telekinetic master. The environments are a huge part of that."

And while games like the Mass Effect trilogy and *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed* have done some good work with telekinetic powers, Kasurinen thinks there's more that can be unlocked. "To me, personally, it has been one of these missed opportunities," he tells us. "There has been *Psi-Ops* a while back and there is the Star Wars game, where there is this sense of telekinesis, and they were great games, but to me it feels like a bit of a missed opportunity." But what he disliked most was being restricted to only picking up certain objects in such examples. "We wanted to say, 'No, you can pick up anything'. It's part of how the world works, and it's there as a foundation that we have built into the game."





we had just been pulled away from only raises more questions than he has time for answers. "You may have a picture of what it is now, but once you start scratching at its surface you'll find that there are many layers to it, that there are secrets that only reveal themselves over time and that these may change the way that you look at this world."

We are inside of The Oldest House, home to the Federal Bureau of Control; a secretive government agency that is charged with seeking out instances of unexplainable phenomena. It is their job to capture Altered Items, to study them, to contain them and attempt to control them. The Oldest House is the open-ended playground that Remedy has decided to unleash its creativity within, a space wherein it feels like just about anything could transpire. Even now as we only just begin to scratch at the surface of the mysteries contained within *Control*'s shifting presentation of reality, it's clear that we have never seen anything quite like this from the studio.

There's a reason for that, Kasurinen tells us, and it all comes back to a newfound sense of freedom that Remedy has embraced since *Control* entered pre-production at the tail end of 2016. "We own the creative IP and we are in full control of it," he says, pausing, asking us to excuse the pun; we eagerly invite him to continue. "Control is a key word throughout the game but, for us, it also has this meta meaning. We are very happy to be in full control of this game and, in many ways, it is allowing us to be strange again."

We have to admit, the mere suggestion that it is *Control* that is allowing Remedy to be strange again made us chuckle. This is a studio that has, after all, become notorious for being something of an outlier in the third-person action-adventure genre. When has Remedy not dealt exclusively in the weird and the wonderful?

The studio made a name for itself with the bullet-dodging action antics of *Max Payne* and its sequel, *The Fall Of Max Payne*, before parting ways with the series in 2003. It would then enter into an exclusive partnership with Microsoft, one that resulted in two exclusives that could hardly be called traditional entries to the action genre. The first was *Alan Wake*, a supernatural thriller in which a laboured writer is terrorised by his own creations throughout a shifting dreamscape. The second was *Quantum Break*, a time-amplified action experience that leveraged a live-action show to help showcase its timeline-bending narrative. If Remedy truly believes that it is only *now* free to get a little strange, then what that says about *Control* is a little dizzying to comprehend.

Still, regardless of how much Remedy wants to stretch itself, *Control* couldn't be in better hands. This is a veteran team of developers, and game director Kasurinen – who served as a gameplay designer on *Max Payne 2*, lead gameplay designer on *Alan Wake* and game director of *Quantum Break* – has a clear understanding of what fans are expecting and which of those expectations Remedy will be able to cleverly subvert. "You could say that *Control* has been brought through in a way that allows all of the different experiences that Remedy has created in the past to come together in one massive game. In a way our past is a foundation for many of the things you will experience in *Control*."

The studio has demonstrated time and time again that it is eager to defy expectation – unwilling to »

The Oldest House is home to the Federal Bureau of Control, a strange government entity dedicated to capturing, researching and controlling mysterious Objects of Power.

Remedy is leaning on its experience with *Max Payne*, *Alan Wake* and *Quantum Break* to create a slick action experience that blends stylish gunplay with the supernatural.



conform to trends in the market. Perhaps that's what makes the prospect of this game so appealing to us. While on the surface it may look like it's all business as usual for Remedy that simply couldn't be further from the truth. "*Control* is a more open-ended and more action-oriented experience when compared to our previous work," he continues. "We do think of *Control* as a more direct and energised take on a Remedy game."

How that works in practice, Kasurinen explains, will likely be a little bit of a shock to the system for fans of the studio's work. "At Remedy we have always approached games in a linear fashion. We start with a screenplay, we figure out the story and then we set out to build this one big experience. But *Control* was a very different process for us," he continues. "Back at the concepting stage we started with the creation of the world, and *then* we looked into the different ways that we could integrate stories into it."

That world the studio spent so many months creating is one bound by dream logic, by ancient rituals that govern progression, temper the delivery of the narrative and gate the way in which we will acquire new abilities and powers that are tied intrinsically to both combat and traversal of this labyrinth space. I short, an entire world within a single location.

Remedy's decision to create what it calls a "more open-ended experience" is untested ground. *Max Payne*, *Alan Wake* and *Quantum Break*, these were games that were linear by design. The story dictated the flow of play; rarely could you double back on yourself or return to areas that you had left behind. That isn't the case here. "There is the main campaign, which is all about Jesse assuming the role of director of The Federal Bureau of Control – of her earning that role and dealing with the Hiss, the strange force that has taken over The Oldest House," he tells us. "But as she tries to figure that out and follow the main campaign she will be presented with a lot of different options that she can tackle if she wants."



Nothing is quite as it seems in *Control*. It occupies a strange space, with the real world overlapping with other disparate realities.

Side-quests are a huge part of the world this time around. It's an opportunity for Remedy to tell smaller stories, ones that lean on the writers' divinity for the strange and unnerving. "We wanted each one to feel relevant or to at least be an interesting thing for you to do. We want to avoid busywork and meaningless fetch quests in *Control*, which [side-quests] can so easily become."

Instead, these quests will give you the means to better understand the world that you inhabit. The refrigerator in Unit 75 that we mentioned before, for example, has an employee of the FCB – one of your agents – stationed in front of it. He cannot tear his eyes from the item in question else it will deviate, causing untold harm to this reality. He has been staring at it for 24 hours and he's eager for a shift change – "Wait! Don't leave me here!" he sobs, desperately. Whether you choose to step in and help is entirely up to you. "It's part of our effort to create this experience that makes this world feel more complicated, like there is more going on than the main story," says Kasurinen. "What was important to me personally was that the player doesn't feel as if we are keeping them on a railroad track – like this is what you *need* to do to proceed through an area. We want the player to have this agency to decide what they want to do and to take a hold of any opportunities as they find them at any given time.

"Our approach has been very much like that of a Metroidvania. While we may limit the player initially, they will quickly come to understand that there are opportunities beyond what they might be able to do right away," says Kasurinen. This mindset is weaved all throughout the spaces that Remedy has created. To that end, everything you can see in The Oldest House is usable in one way or another. If you can reach a door it can be opened, maybe not immediately, but eventually. That's the mantra Remedy has adopted here, although the how and when is largely dependent on the abilities you have acquired and the rituals that you come to understand. "As you progress through this journey, Jesse will acquire new abilities and find new items that will help you," Kasurinen tells us. "They will allow you to access more areas in The Oldest House and give you a reason to return to some of the locations that you have already visited before as well."

As Jesse explores and deepens her search within the bowels of the FCB, she will begin to encounter Altered Items. While a typical adventure game cut from the Metroidvania-cloth may use coloured key cards, new weapons or gadgets as a way of gating progression, *Control* is, well, something else entirely. It is something *very* Remedy indeed. "The idea is that there are these Objects of Power in the world and The Federal Bureau of Control goes after them; they investigate them, contain them and bring them back to their headquarters to try and understand them.

"These objects have a power embedded into them," Kasurinen continues. "A power they have somehow acquired over time – each one has a unique history to it, and many of them are still not fully understood. But what Jesse can do is bind these objects to herself; she assimilates the power, allowing her to do all of these crazy things."

These powers extend into everything *Control* has to offer. They give Jesse the means to navigate and survive The Oldest House. We see, for example, her levitate across huge gaps in the architecture to new, previously unreachable spaces – we catch but »



Jesse Faden quickly assumes the role of director of the FCB. It's a way for her to get answers about her past, a childhood shrouded in heartbreak and mysterious circumstances.



WHEN IS A GUN NOT A GUN?

WHEN IT'S A SHAPE-SHIFTING STAND-IN FOR EXCALIBUR, OF COURSE

The Service Weapon in *Control* is just one of the many strange and moderately disturbing elements of Remedy's latest game, but it's also one of its most exciting. Not only does the weapon shift and upgrade through the course of the game, unlocking new firing modes, it also carries with it some mythological importance. "We went back and looked at legends such as The Sword and The Stone, where only the true king can actually pull out the sword in the stone," says game director Mikael Kasurinen. "So instead of having this feeling where you are this classic hero who moves through the world and collects this arsenal of 'now I have a kalashnikov and, oh, now I have an MP5', it just didn't feel right in *Control*. What we worked on was to establish a very symbolic and iconic weapon that feels like it has a story that goes beyond Jesse. It's part of the story of the Bureau itself, and even beyond that."

So, having claimed the weapon, Jesse is not only now empowered enough to take on the threat of the Hiss, she is also the defacto head of the Federal Bureau of Control. Thus far we've seen it in its Grip and Shatter configurations, acting as a classic pistol and shotgun respectfully, but there's more to it than that. The Service Weapon's exact lineage is something Remedy is happy for us to ponder on our own for the time being. "Having that idea for the weapon was critical so that it has this sense of wondering attached to it; you'll wonder what else could it be," says Kasurinen. "It has this feeling of opportunity to it. Creating this interesting, shifting visual look to it was really important too. It looks mystical and weird, and it takes different kinds of shapes. It does very different things gameplay-wise. We've only shown two of those forms so far, but it can go way beyond that, and it's only going to get way more interesting."



Remedy is building the combat in a way that Jesse will have full control over the environment, using telekineses to tear items out of the world and turn them on her foes.

HOLDING ON TO HOPE

DID CUTS TO QUANTUM BREAK HELP INSPIRE REMEDY'S NEW LEAD?

This is the second time that Remedy has teamed up with Courtney Hope, having previously cast her as Beth Wilder in its Xbox One exclusive *Quantum Break*. It's become part of that game's legend that it went through about as many shifts and alterations as The Oldest House, with one of the biggest being a significant reduction in the role of Wilder (and, by extension, Hope) in the final release. We asked game director Mikael Kasurinen whether that was in any way a factor in the creation of Hope's new role as Jesse Faden. "No, not really," he insists. "Of course, we love Courtney Hope and *Quantum Break*, and we wanted her to have a bigger role in it, a more dedicated gameplay moment in it as well. Her story I absolutely loved in *Quantum Break*, and while we were doing it we did discuss how cool of an experience we could build with Beth, but it was quite early on that we decided 'let's just focus on Jack and so on, it's his story'."



The Oldest House is full of Altered Items, Objects of Power that have the power to tear through realms. Figuring out the mysteries of these will be a big part of *Control*.

a glimpse of where we could venture next, and the amount of opportunity is breathtaking. The powers also feed into her combat prowess, becoming an instrumental part in Jesse's struggle against the invading Hiss forces. She can warp reality around her, evading incoming attacks with speed, and throw out a supernatural shield of sorts to protect her should speed not be enough. Using telekinesis Jesse can rip just about anything out of the environment around her and utilise it as a weapon, an element of the game that's as destructive as it is pleasing to the eye. Truth be told, the combat looks like a smart blend of the style presented in *Max Payne* with the supernatural of *Quantum Break* – if Jesse's service weapon also happens to double up as a flashlight this truly will be the quintessential Remedy experience.

What Kasurinen is eager to convey is that everything in *Control* will feed back to the player in some way. There is lore and gameplay value for exploring the world, completing side-quests and, eventually, following the breadcrumbs of the main narrative throughline. "We always want the player to have a sense that they are learning something valuable about the world as they are completing side missions. That there is another aspect to the world around them and that maybe it makes you think about things a little differently."

If anything is going to make us think a little differently about this world, it's going to be the presence of rituals. You can't progress through the world or story by the acquisition of power alone; much of Jesse's ability to travel deeper into The Oldest House comes by way of acquiring the knowledge and confidence to embrace her role as director of the FBC.

"Everything you see has a meaning. Your actions have meaning in this world and they can have consequences to this reality," warns Kasurinen. "We took that idea and made it a core part of the gameplay, a part of things that you have to figure out as a way of moving forward in the world.

"Jesse has an understanding of these things; she has an intuitive feel for what is the right thing to





The Oldest House is a shifting space. As you explore more of the world you will gain access to new rituals, allowing you to unlock new, previously inaccessible areas.

do," teases Kasurinen, noting that Jesse has, like so many Remedy protagonists, a history shrouded in mystery that we will at some point discover. "*Control* is a combination of her going through this experience, but at the same time what we want to do is create elements within that experience that make players connect elements together and try to understand them… there's this hidden meaning there and that's for players to figure out."

It's the instances of the rituals governing the construction of the world that give perhaps the best indication as to how Remedy is attempting to tie these various ideas, systems, and game mechanics together in a distinctly strange, overtly Remedy style.

At one stage in the demo – the moments leading up to Jesse arriving at the Panopticon that we described at the outset of this feature – we see Jesse wander through the lobby of The Oldest House, only to encounter a security checkpoint that she cannot immediately pass. "Rituals control the environment here," notes the mysterious projection of Trench, the former director of the FCB whose shoes you have inadvertently stepped into. "Dream logic is a requirement for survival; some things aren't connected by causality, but rather by the meaning that we give them."

From here Jesse knows what she has to do. She pulls at a chord twice, the light in the open-plan chamber switching off and on as she does. As she tugs at it a third time she is transported to another time, another place; a motel corridor that wouldn't have looked out of place in *Bright Falls.* She explores the Wayfair Lodge reception, grabbing a key from behind the desk, and approaches one of the ground-floor rooms, a door with a Black Pyramid etched into its wood – a symbol signifying the Astral Plane. In the room is a picture frame; in it, Jesse can see a painting of herself viewing a doorway. "The Oldest House is my house. I am a servant of the Black Pyramid," she mutters to herself, hand outstretched to another chord hanging from the ceiling. "I have the right to be here. I have the clearance."

She pulls the chord and in an instant she is inside of the painting, staring at the doorway rather than the frame. She's in the firebreak now, a section of The Oldest House that was locked behind the security checkpoint. Jesse is in a room of endless walkways now. She levitates, moving through space, the Panopticon ahead; the exhibit of Altered Items, the Benicoff TV – the entrance to the Astral Plane.

It's weird. It's trippy. We have no idea how it's going to work or how you acquire the knowledge that governs these rituals, but we have to say, it feels like something Remedy (and Remedy alone) could get away with. It truly is a bold way to structure a game, but this is a path that the studio feels emboldened to follow all the same.

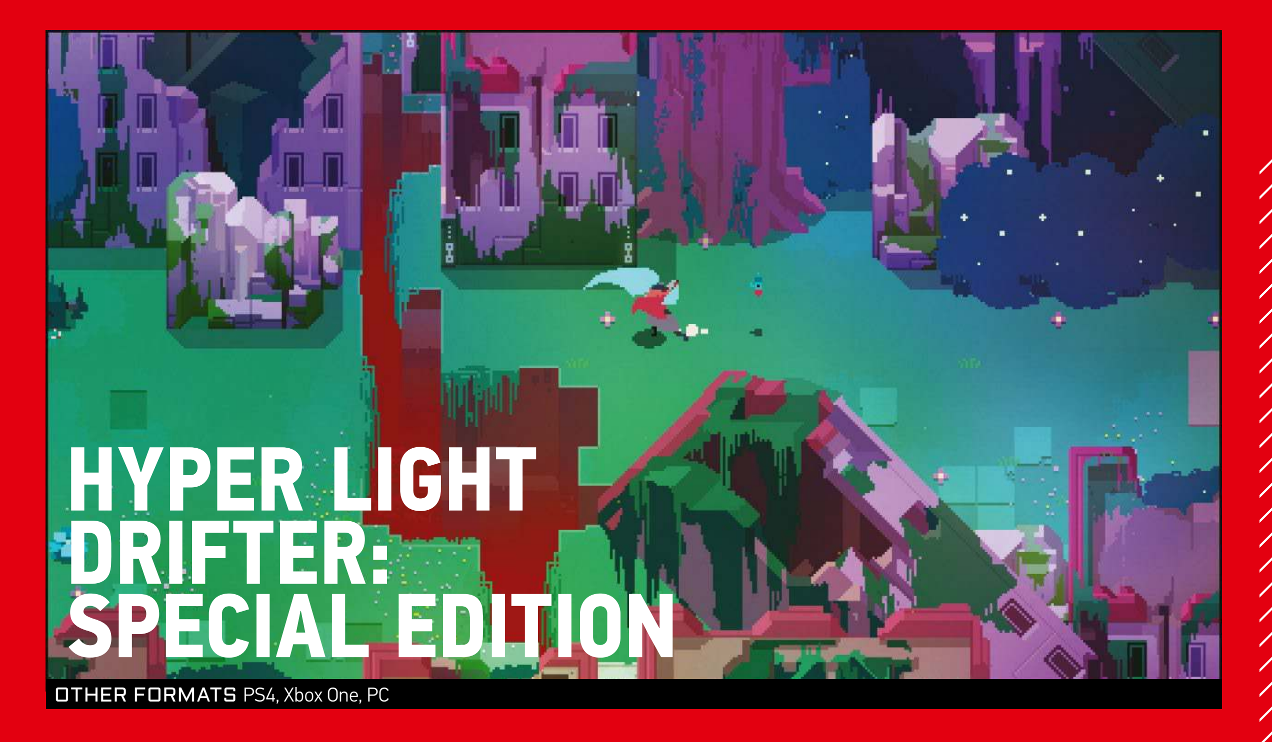
If this is indeed Remedy unrestrained, free to follow its every whim – free of publisher interference – then we're certainly ready for the ride. Kasurinen believes that *Control* in its current form would have struggled to exist a decade ago, that the market has shifted significantly not just in terms of technology, but with respect to audience expectation too. Remedy feels as if it is able to embrace an inherent gravitation towards strangeness because the players are prepared to embrace the inherent weirdness of its creation. "We don't have to worry as much about pissing people off when it isn't made immediately clear what it is that's going on. I think culturally we are reaching a place now, with games, where we can be a bit more complicated and ambitious with our storytelling and our worlds.

"If you look at popular culture, that has been this rise of books and movies that embrace the strangeness; it's something that people love and get excited about," Kasurinen continues. "Just look at something like *Annihilation*… the idea of a movie like that actually being made would have been inconceivable to me ten years ago. We are excited that we can embrace this. This is what we would talk about internally and now I feel like we can do it, that people are ready to play this type of game. It's been very liberating for us."

BETTER ON SWITCH?

Nintendo Switch's library is bigger than ever, but which ports genuinely benefit from being on a hybrid platform?





HYPER LIGHT DRIFTER: SPECIAL EDITION

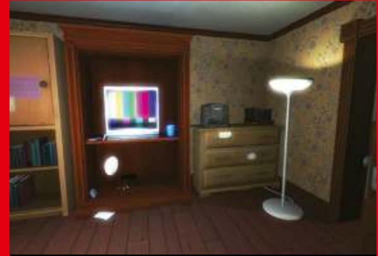
OTHER FORMATS PS4, Xbox One, PC

KEY DIFFERENCES

The Special Edition of *Hyper Light Drifter* features plenty of content that's entirely exclusive to Nintendo Switch (at least for the time being, that is). The titular Drifter now has access to two additional weapons – the Crystal Shot and the Blade Caster – which offer a very different combat style to the game's other tools, and a brand new outfit. You can also use the exclusive Tower Climb Challenge, which tasks you with defeating waves of enemies with increasing difficulty.

BETTER ON SWITCH?

It's a shame the PS Vita port never saw the light of day, there's a real magic to playing the intense pixel art action in handheld mode. Running at a silky smooth 60fps, it's a pairing that was simply meant to be. Add in all those Switch-exclusive weapons, costumes and modes and you've got *the* definitive edition of *Hyper Light Drifter*. Adventures like this benefit so much from being playable on the go.



OTHER FORMATS PS4, Xbox One, PC

GONE HOME

KEY DIFFERENCES

While the Nintendo Switch port of The Fullbright Company's acclaimed exploration simulator doesn't boast any content or features unique to the platform, simply being able to take the deeply personal story unfolding before your eyes on the move makes it feel even more intimate as a result.

BETTER ON SWITCH?

Gone Home was always destined to come to a Nintendo platform, although that seemed in doubt when the planned Wii U port never materialised. Thankfully, Switch has performed better than anyone expected, and it's given its developer just enough hardware to have the measured pace of *Gone Home* run smoothly in handheld, tabletop and docked modes. Even having access to the commentary nodes – which feature on all other versions of the game – adds to the tangible intimacy that only a game such as this can offer.



OTHER FORMATS PS4, Xbox One, PC

CRASH BANDICOOT: N. SANE TRILOGY

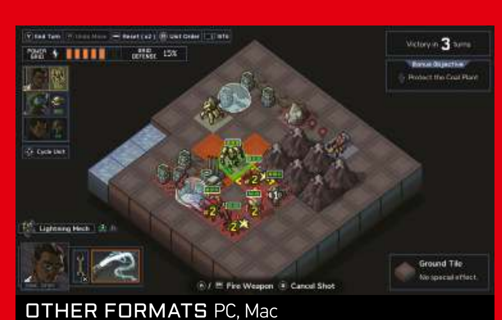
KEY DIFFERENCES

The Nintendo Switch port of *Crash Bandicoot: N. Sane Trilogy* did receive a few tweaks to get it to run smoothly on a less powerful platform – including a reduction in resolution and a few graphical downgrades here and there – but unless you're really nitpicking, you would hardly notice. Especially when playing the game in handheld mode.

BETTER ON SWITCH?

There's a reason Crash Bandicoot's modern revamp stayed on top of the charts for so long in 2018 - because its Switch version presents the best platform to enjoy it on. While we'd all spend hours playing the PS1 originals, the stress-inducing difficulty of the levels in all three games are perfect for enjoying in small bursts. Whether you're taking Crash for a spin on your TV, or getting in a few wumpa fruit at lunchtime in handheld mode, the former PlayStation mascot now feels right at home on Nintendo.

INTO THE BREACH



OTHER FORMATS PC, Mac

KEY DIFFERENCES

For a game based around tactical decisions and unit management, the *Into The Breach* port greatly benefits from having controller support – whether you're using the Joy-Cons or the Pro Controller (something you can't even do on PC at the moment). Add in native touchscreen support and you've got the most versatile version of the game yet.

BETTER ON SWITCH?

The Nintendo Switch version of *Into the Breach* doesn't feature any new pieces of content, but then again, it doesn't need to. Despite previously being a PC-only release, its grid-based tactical gameplay has always seemed destined for the touchscreen interaction of a mobile platform. With a mixture of touchscreen and analogue controls, its small battlefields and short skirmishes suit Switch's pick up and play ethos down to a tee.

OKAMI HD



OTHER FORMATS Xbox One, PS4, PC

KEY DIFFERENCES

Okami is one of those beloved classics that's managed to make the jump from its original console onto almost any platform you can think of. As a result, it's become a little ubiquitous on PS4, Xbox One and the like. Thankfully, Switch's unique hardware premise provides this colourful platformer with an extra spark thanks to support for both widescreen and the original 4:3 aspect ratio, and the ability to use Switch's touchscreen in handheld mode. Perfect for delicate swishes of the Celestial Brush.

BETTER ON SWITCH?

The Nintendo Switch version benefits from the visual upgrades of the HD release, so you're getting a visually resplendent port that's nigh-on perfect in terms of performance and frame rate. As a result, you're finally getting the chance to see this Japanese classic, in full, on a handheld platform. There are no concessions – in fact, thanks to the HD upgrade, it recaptures that same magic that made the PS2 original so essential.





DARKEST DUNGEON: ANCESTRAL EDITION

OTHER FORMATS PS4, Xbox One, PC, Mac

KEY DIFFERENCES

The Switch version of this turn-based battler boasts the same experience you play anywhere else, ensuring you can enjoy its 16 playable characters and its roguelike battles anywhere. For the most part, it's a faithful port and runs noticeably smoother on Switch than it does on PS Vita. Its touchscreen controls also work a lot better on the larger screen that Nintendo's console offers in handheld mode.

BETTER ON SWITCH?

Darkest Dungeon was designed with the mouse and keyboard control of PC in mind, but developer Red Hook Studios proved it could map the interface to the vastly different setup of a console. With superior hardware and the choice of both analogue *and* touchscreen controls, the Switch version boasts the best and most intimate way to enjoy its eldritch horror and merciless combat.

BAYONETTA 2



OTHER FORMATS Wii U

KEY DIFFERENCES

Platinum Games made some subtle yet important changes to *Bayonetta 2* when it ported the title over to Switch, including offering the ability to play co-op both locally and online (you could only play online on Wii U). You can also get a copy of the original *Bayonetta* for Nintendo Switch if you buy the boxed copy, so you can get the full Bayonetta experience before the third entry (a Switch exclusive) arrives. And that Switch Special Edition? Mwah.

BETTER ON SWITCH?

There's no denying that *Bayonetta 2* is fundamentally better on Nintendo Switch. It's a superior console to Wii U in almost every way, and being able to use the Joy-Cons over the clunky GamePad is a welcome upgrade in itself. It looks crisper and runs far smoother in handheld mode, making for the definitive version of a Platinum Games classic.

ROCKET LEAGUE



OTHER FORMATS PS4, Xbox One, PC, Mac

KEY DIFFERENCES

In terms of performance and progression, *Rocket League* on Switch is on par with other versions – which helps with the fact it supports cross-platform play with users on Steam and Xbox Live. The Switch version supports multiplayer with up to eight other players online, and supports ad-hoc local play as well. You also get access to some Nintendo-themed chassis and other accessories for your car, so your friends on Xbox One and PS4 can go green with envy while you go green with Luigi.

BETTER ON SWITCH?

Absolutely. For optimum controls you'll want to use a Pro Controller, so you can pull off some insane final touches in mid-air, but it's still a hoot to play with your Joy-Cons in handheld mode or tabletop mode. With cross-platform play (as well the incoming ability to party-up online with players using other platforms), there's never been a better and more diverse console to play *Rocket League*, casually or competitively.



OTHER FORMATS PS4, Xbox One, PC

CELESTE

KEY DIFFERENCES

Celeste on Switch doesn't feature any new bits of content or additional levels, but then again, it simply doesn't need to. Madeline's heartfelt ascent is perfect in and of itself, and it's only made better by being on a platform that supports both playing on a TV or anywhere else via handheld/tabletop mode.

BETTER ON SWITCH?

Considering *Celeste* sold the most copies on Nintendo Switch, we're inclined to agree this version is the best way to experience the long climb up that titular mountain. Whether using the Joy-Cons or a Pro Controller, you never feel the hardware is getting in the way of the precise twitch-style movement that makes its platforming so addictively difficult. And few games look as good as *Celeste* when running in handheld mode.



OTHER FORMATS Wii U, 3DS

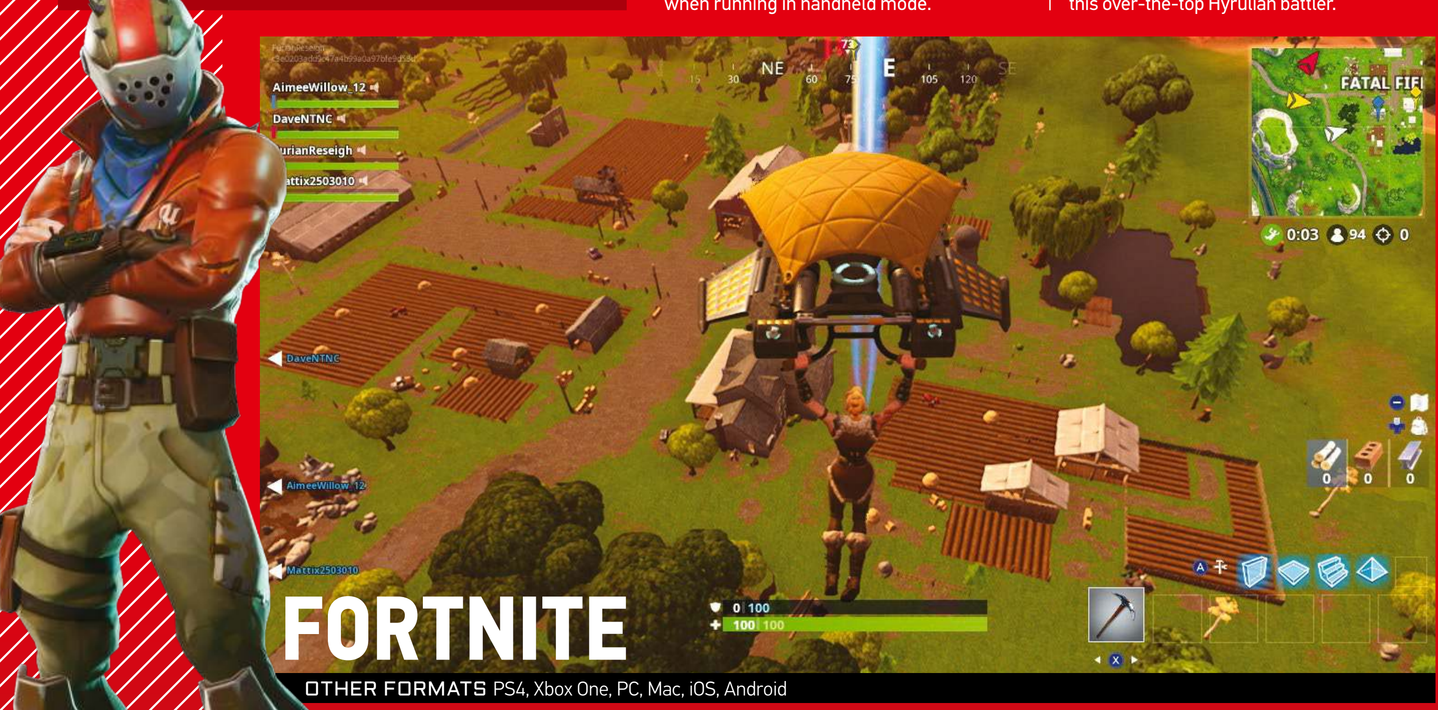
HYRULE WARRIORS

KEY DIFFERENCES

The Nintendo Switch port of *Hyrule Warriors* is called the *Definitive Edition* for a good reason. It combines the exclusive content used in the Wii U and 3DS versions respectively, and unites them on a console that just happens to support handheld gaming *and* TV-based play. The Switch port also supports local co-op, 1080p resolution (60fps), a maximum level cap of 255, plus so much more. Definitive doesn't even start to cover it all.

BETTER ON SWITCH?

There's no doubt in our minds that *Hyrule Warriors: Definitive Edition* is *the* best way to enjoy Omega Force and Team Ninja's 'musou'-style action brawler. With all the exclusive DLC found on the two previous versions – plus costumes themed around *The Legend of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild* – Switch has become the only place to play this over-the-top Hyrulian battler.



FORTNITE

OTHER FORMATS PS4, Xbox One, PC, Mac, iOS, Android

KEY DIFFERENCES

A big selling point for playing *Fortnite* on Nintendo Switch over any other platform is the support for motion controls. It's a unique feature that Switch boasts over other platforms, and while it's not the best example of the tech (*DOOM*, *Skyrim* and *Wolfenstein II* are some of the greats in that regard), it's still a great way to frag other players via cross-play online.

BETTER ON SWITCH?

With so much choice when it comes to how you play, it's impossible not to recommend Nintendo Switch as the best place to play *Fortnite*. Grab a Pro Controller and you can learn to play competitively, or switch to your Joy-Cons for a little casual/motion-controlled fun. Whether in handheld or on your TV in docked mode, *Fortnite* on Switch unites the mobile and console versions into one superior form. It's the best of both worlds and it compromises nothing.



THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM

OTHER FORMATS PS4, Xbox One, PC

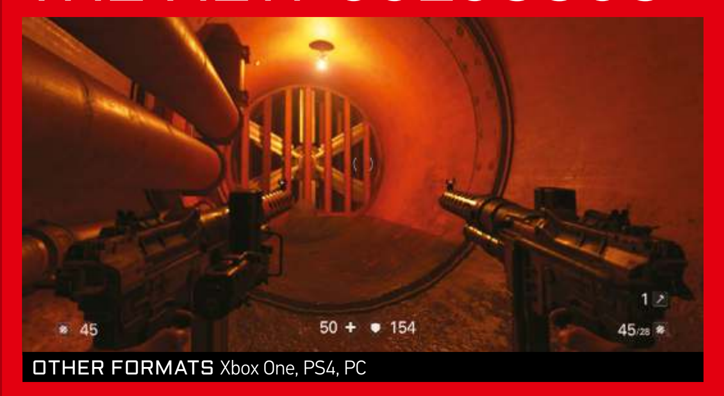
KEY DIFFERENCES

The big differences between *Skyrim* on Switch and every other version comes in the use of motion controls. Yes, the version on PS4 does support PSVR, but Switch's Joy-Cons make for a far more precise experience, especially when in combat. Add to that some Switch-exclusive items (like Link's tunic, sword and shield from *Breath Of The Wild*) and you've got an impressive alternative to every other console port.

BETTER ON SWITCH?

Of course, there's no denying Switch's hardware can't hold a torch to the unbound power of a PC or access the endless mods that have kept the *Skyrim* community alive since its launch in 2011. But even without these factors to its name, *Skyrim* on Switch is still an intrinsically complete experience. From ascending the Throat of the World to battling Daedric beasts on the shores of Solstheim, nothing can compare to exploring Tamriel's frostiest region in the glory of handheld mode.

WOLFENSTEIN II: THE NEW COLOSSUS



OTHER FORMATS Xbox One, PS4, PC

KEY DIFFERENCES

While there is a noticeable visual downgrade in order to get *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* running on a less powerful machine, the Switch version is still a graphically impressive version of the game considering you're getting the full gameplay experience you'd get elsewhere. The Switch incarnation also supports motion controls – something no other platform can boast. And considering these are the same accurate gyro controls used with the *DOOM* port on Switch, you know you're getting more than a box-ticking feature.

BETTER ON SWITCH?

While the version you can play on PS4, PC and Xbox One benefits from all the graphical bells and whistles that more powerful hardware provides, nothing beats stealth killing Nazis while in handheld mode, or using the Joy-Cons to line up a headshot while in tabletop mode. A bit of blurring isn't going to detract from that.

STARDEW VALLEY



OTHER FORMATS PS Vita, PS4, Xbox One, PC, Mac

KEY DIFFERENCES

Thanks to a recent update, the PC version of Eric Barone's relaxing farming sim now supports four-player multiplayer so you can either build your settlement and meet townsfolk by yourself, or link up with others and till the earth together. Console versions of the game – including Switch – will be getting the same update in the coming months.

BETTER ON SWITCH?

Despite not having access to the game's new multiplayer mode, there's no denying just how well the colourful world of *Stardew Valley* suits a handheld Nintendo console. There's a reason it's always one of the highest selling games in the eShop. Being able to build your farm from the ground up on your TV, then pick up you Switch and continue that journey anywhere, gives the game a diversity of interaction no other platform – including fellow handheld PS Vita – can match.


OTHER FORMATS PC, PS4, Xbox One

BAD NORTH

KEY DIFFERENCES

While the version of *Bad North* currently available on the Nintendo Switch eShop doesn't differ from other versions in terms of content, the mixture of controls really does set it apart. You can use both the Joy-Cons or the Switch's touchscreen to interact with your island-based defenders, enabling you to move units and swing the camera at the flick of an analogue stick or the swipe of a finger.

BETTER ON SWITCH?

There's no question that *Bad North*'s ultimate form resides on Nintendo's hybrid machine. Being able to play on your TV or from the intimacy of handheld mode helps this game feel like a console game and a mobile experience without compromising one another. The mixture of analogue and touchscreen controls really makes this a joy to play in handheld mode. It comes together to make this *Bad North* at its absolute best.


OTHER FORMATS PS4, Xbox One, PC, Mac

PALADINS: CHAMPIONS OF THE REALM

KEY DIFFERENCES

While it's taken developer Hi-Rez Studios a little while to get the Nintendo Switch version of the game on par with other platforms in terms of content and event updates, there's now zero disadvantage to playing on Switch bar the occasional bit of slowdown when navigating between menus. The Switch port also boasts solid net code and support for motion controls, an exclusive feature you won't find anywhere else.

BETTER ON SWITCH?

While it's tough to compete with the accuracy and precision of a mouse and keyboard, the support for handheld play and the use of motion controls makes *Paladins* on Switch *the* best version you can play on console. It runs super smoothly, plays like a dream with a Pro Controller and supports everything from quick play to ranked matches. And it's free to play. What more could you ask for?


OTHER FORMATS Xbox One, PS4, PC, Mac

DEAD CELLS

KEY DIFFERENCES

In terms of sheer in-game content, *Dead Cells* is pretty much the same across all platforms, but that hasn't stopped the hybrid version becoming the most popular version among players. Being able to take its tough yet fair approach to roguelike exploration and fast-paced combat on the move makes Switch the go-to platform.

BETTER ON SWITCH?

Despite some performance issues at launch, *Dead Cells* on Nintendo Switch has gone on to outsell the PS4 version four to one, making it the most popular platform for the indie hit. And you can see why, with the allure of playing in handheld/tabletop mode an ideal fit for Motion Twin's action platforming gem. It joins *Hollow Knight*, *Celeste* and *Hyper Light Drifter: Special Edition* and cements Switch as the new home of indie development and celebration.



CAPTAIN TOAD: TREASURE TRACKER

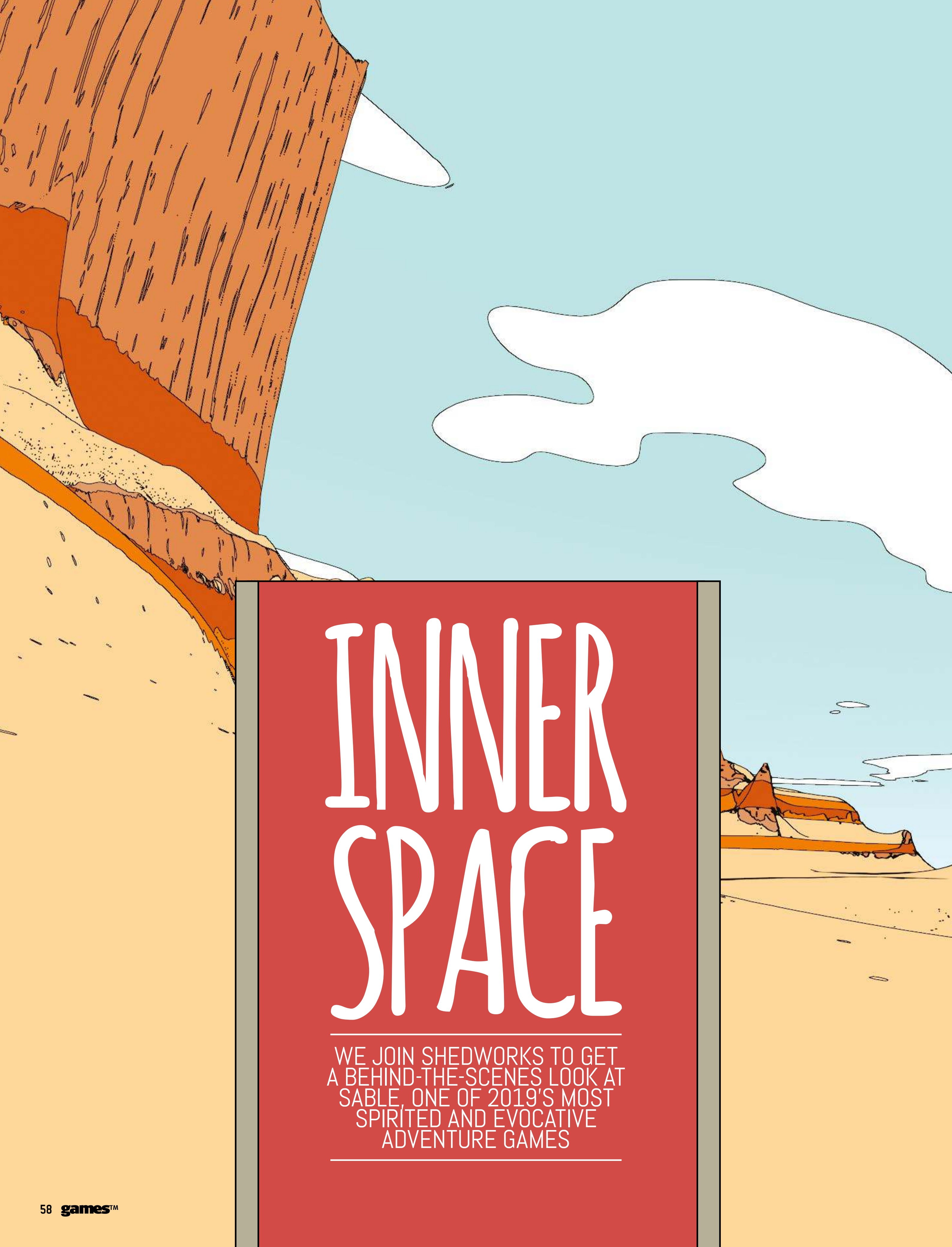
OTHER FORMATS Wii U, 3DS

KEY DIFFERENCES

Much like *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe* and *Bayonetta 2*, *Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker* benefits significantly from making the jump from Wii to Switch. Apart from the fact that it's now on a far more popular platform with a much larger install base, it boasts new and redesigned levels (with those based on *Super Mario 3D World* replaced with sections inspired by *Super Mario Odyssey*), the ability to play it fully on your TV (you had to play it in conjunction with screen on the GamePad on Wii U) and the removal of those annoying bits where you had to blow on the mic.

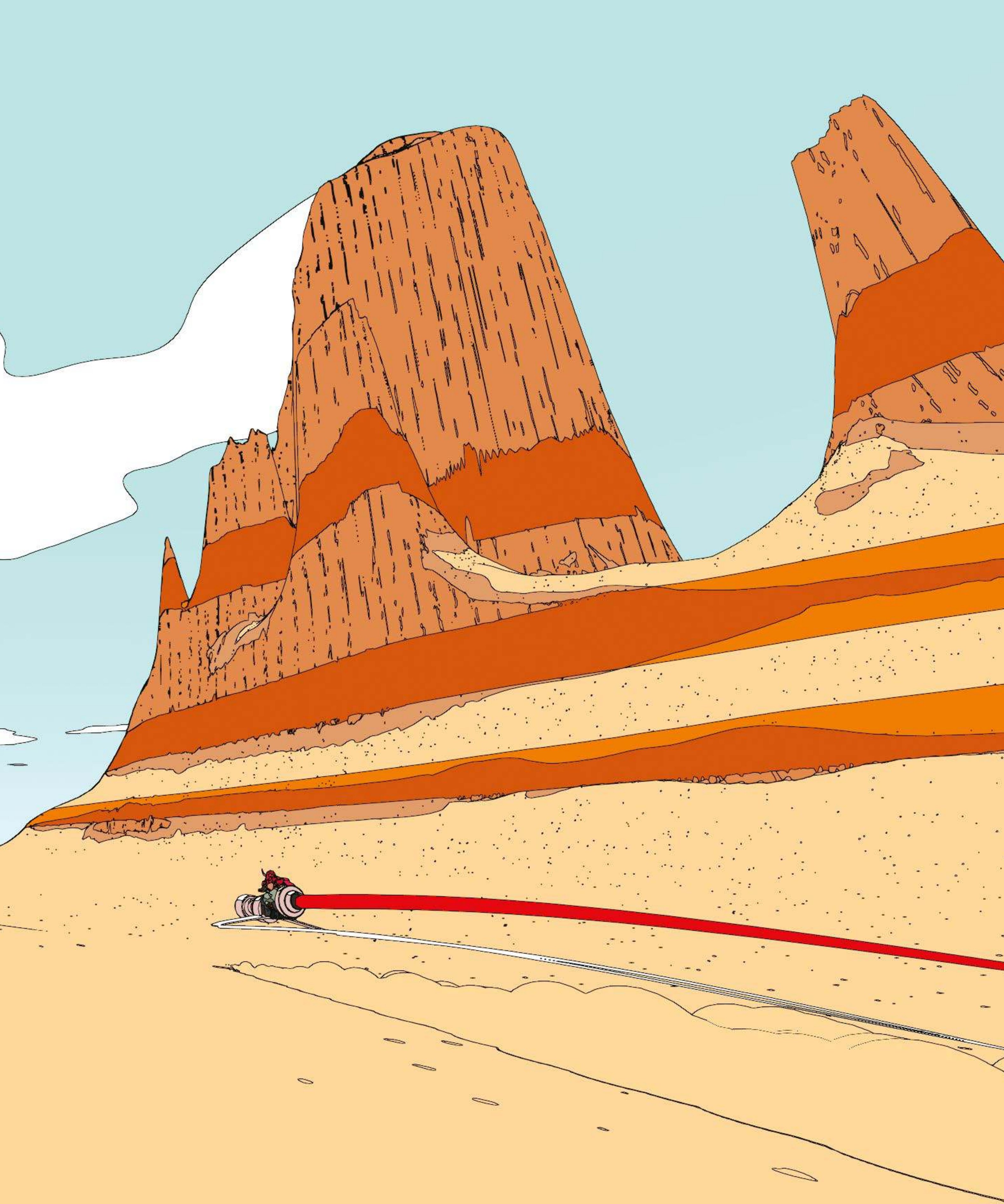
BETTER ON SWITCH?

Even with the changes made to UI, and the brand new levels designed for the Switch, *Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker* looks and feels revitalised just by appearing on anything other than a dead platform. A fun, friendly and rewarding puzzle platformer that suits Switch's ethos to a tee.



INNER SPACE

WE JOIN SHEDWORKS TO GET A BEHIND-THE-SCENES LOOK AT SABLE, ONE OF 2019'S MOST SPIRITED AND EVOCATIVE ADVENTURE GAMES



Sable is being developed by Shedworks, two young designers working out of a shed in North London. The game is being built in Unity and is scheduled for release in 2019, with Raw Fury picking up publishing duties.







While *Sable* will feature a light inventory system you won't ever need worry about throwing anything away or managing any type of resource. A big part of the game is collecting masks and parts for your bike, hence why there are no restrictions in that sense.

So many great science-fiction stories work best when their heads are not in the stars. When they look beyond the spectacle of worlds colliding, taking time to zero in on the human condition (or close alien approximation), they reflect back to us something personal. We so often find ourselves propelled to worlds unknown, but it's the stories that drag us back to the ground, that make these adventures in other times and worlds so relatable and, hopefully, irresistible.

An easy point of comparison for *Sable* would be Star Wars, but not in the way that you might necessarily expect. Consider for a second our introduction to Rey on Jaku, at the 11th minute mark of *The Force Awakens*; do we find the character so immediately intriguing because we know that she will soon embark on the adventure of a lifetime? Or is it because we can't help but imagine all of the adventures that have led her to this moment, as the lens of a camera first finds her out there, in a seeming wasteland?

We would like to believe it is the latter, and it's here where *Sable* finds focus too, grounded, but looking up at the stars. Daniel Fineberg and Greg Kythreotis, the co-founders (and only members) of *Sable*'s development studio Shedworks, found inspiration in a similar concept; one that was compelling enough that in the spring of 2017 the pair took to Kythreotis' parents' garden shed in North London to begin prototyping concepts that played with that very idea of a personal journey through a very alien world. The humble garden shed, once again the launchpad for giant ideas.

“WE WANT PEOPLE TO APPROACH THE GAME WITH A SENSE OF WONDER AND CURIOSITY”
GREGORIOS KYTHREOTIS



The self-taught development duo has chipped away at industry projects over the last four years, free-to-play mobile games and some auxiliary work on Nintendo's *Snipperclips*, but nothing on this scale. A coming-of-age tale told exclusively through discovery, exploration and cultural exchange, all of it cast out across a strikingly rendered desert wasteland.

Fineberg, who 'does the programming and stuff' on the upcoming title describes *Sable* as a game that “at its core is an open-world exploration game”. We're familiar with such experiences and they can take many shapes. Here you play as Sable, a young woman who is about to embark on an important personal adventure leaving the homestead for the very first time to find her place in the world.

This is a pilgrimage and an important milestone to the people that inhabit this mysterious planet, an ancient rite of passage that all must undertake to better understand their world and their position within it. “As the people of this world reach a certain age they leave home for the first time; it's a kind of coming-of-age ritual,” says Fineberg. “They go out on a journey to learn how to navigate the world, they travel to other towns to meet the people and to learn of their history before eventually returning home.”

Kythreotis, the other member of Shedworks who is responsible for 'art and design and stuff', explains that this is a deeply personal journey for Sable, all of it shaped by the actions of the player. As a journey it's one of self-discovery, learning and understanding; how each of these is decoded is down to the individual. “Once we introduce the character and establish the world, Sable is free to go out and explore.

“We want people to approach the game with a sense of wonder and curiosity,” Kythreotis continues. “We want you to invest in this world, its history and its culture. You are learning about the world as Sable is learning about herself, as she is discovering who she is as an adult in this environment. The two of you are on this journey together, experiencing these things together.”

In a gameplay demonstration we see Sable scaling the side of an ancient mountain, eventually taking a pause on a rocky outcropping to get her bearings. As she does, a stamina gauge begins to gradually refill, similar to *Breath Of The World*, giving us the opportunity to become lost in the mesmerising view out there in front of us. We see ruined architecture off to the north and a fallen ship to the east, and out to the west we swear we can spot a thick plume of smoke binding itself to the night sky.

We can visit and explore all of these places, we're told, should we be so inclined. A stamina meter isn't the only influence the latest Zelda has had on *Sable*. “We want to give players the freedom to choose where they go and what they see, to find the things they find interesting about the world,” reaffirms Fineberg. “Anything that you can see on the horizon, if it catches your interest, you will be able to reach it and explore it.”

You can climb pretty much anything in the environment; your only limitations are that stamina gauge and your desire to explore. The sparse and immersive world paints a picture of isolation but, much like Hyrule, it's the detail that you find in the minutiae of the spaces that truly brings definition and life to the landscape.

Given the size of the space and the lack of direction that the game presents, it should be pretty clear that Sable wouldn't get all that far on foot. Thankfully, you are able to traverse the desert wastes via a hoverbike – one that isn't all that dissimilar to the type of vehicle Rey utilised in *The Force Awakens*. The bike is an important element of *Sable*, one Fineberg hopes players will forge a connection with as they begin to sink more and more time into exploration. “The hoverbikes are an important part of the world. People need them to survive: they need them for trade, for travel and to do their jobs. Your hoverbike is your most important possession – it's your travel companion, it goes with

PRESSURES OF TIME

Given the open and organic design of *Sable*, not to mention the fact that a core team of just two is responsible for much of what you see, you might be wondering just how much of your time the game is likely to consume. The studio's lead designer and artist Gregorios Kythreotis admits that it is difficult to pinpoint, although he hopes something like *The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild* will ultimately prove to be a good reference point. “Once you get off of the Great Plateau, the first mission that you get is to go off and destroy Ganon. You can do that in the first few hours if you want to, but you can also just spend 200 hours exploring the world,” he says, although he is quick to assert that the comparison is tangential at best. “The point is, we always want players to engage with the story without directly following it…”

It feels as if *Sable* has been built to allow this, although lead programmer Daniel Fineberg is quick to admit that the size of the game will largely come down to how much time the pair can invest into it before they decide to release. “It really does depend on how much content we are able to build. If we manage to create ten stories, that might take you ten hours. If we create 20 stories then it will be longer, but we don't really know,” he says, laughing. “We can be quite flexible. We don't have all of these important story beats that we need to hit. You know, we have a list of ideas and we will make as many as we have time for.”

“That's what makes this viable for two people,” adds Kythreotis, also with a smile. “Besides, doing it this way means we can keep all the good stories in and cut out all of the bad ones.”

You will be able to customise elements of your hoverbike, from the general shape and size of it to how it controls and handles out on the desert planes.

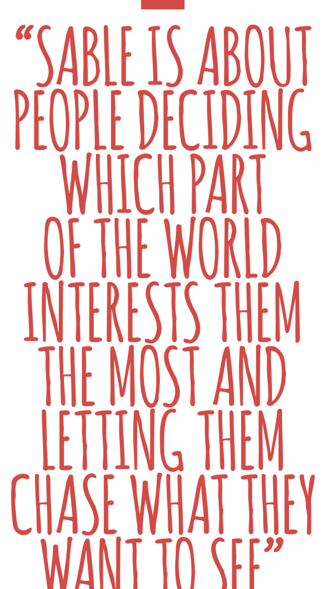
you everywhere on your journey," Fineberg tells us, noting that it can indeed be customised and improved upon as your adventure continues. "We want people to feel like the bike is their own and a part of how we do that is by making the bike customisable. You can swap out the parts so you can get it how you like it."

Each bike is made up of various components, and these can be swapped and changed as you discover new parts through scavenging or trade. Elements such as the colour of the trail – in our demo a sharp, red vapour trail piercing through the thick dust kicked up from the desert sands, a visual identifier that has burned itself into our brains – the shape of the chassis, the width of the wings, all of it can be altered, and the result of this extends beyond the cosmetic.

"Different parts have different properties, so they might change how the bike feels to control – they might make it move faster or turn better," Fineberg continues. "You might find an old broken bike out there that somebody has left behind and, if you fix the parts, then you might bring them with you. You might visit a village and trade for new parts with a local mechanic, or maybe they will fix up your bike and give you a new engine under the right circumstances. This is all a part of us trying to convey that this bike is something that you should look after, that it is valuable and it is important."

It's funny to think that *Sable* once began life as little more than an idea and £5 worth of test assets, comprised of a hoverbike, a rough, three-dimensional space and a collection of sand dune art materials. That these few assets would eventually evolve into this, the pristine and evocative line work of Jean "Moebius" Giraud brought to life on an interactive canvas, is amazing.

"Our art is pretty stylised… there aren't many videogames that look like this," admits Kythreotis with a smile, he knows how powerful the visual hook of *Sable* is better than most. As the team reels off its influences, it's clear that they fall into two primary camps: drawing from the expression, detail and colour palette of European comic books – such as the famed work of French illustrator Moebius – and that of the smooth flow and feel found in Japanese animation, as seen



in such works as *Akira, Nausicaä Of The Valley Of The Wind* and *Princess Mononoke*. "They were actually some of our main inspirations, and a lot of these are overlapping elements in *Sable*," Fineberg tells us. "These interests heavily influenced one another, they draw on each other for the game's art style and feel."

Visually, there's nothing else quite like *Sable* out there. It is as awe-inspiring as it is otherworldly; it's a world just crying out to be explored – or perhaps, more importantly, understood. Truth be told, it caught us a little off guard. While the game's colour palette and stark shapes are certainly mesmerising, we weren't expecting to find so much detail in the environments. The particle effects are also hugely impressive, helping to bring fluidity to the world around you – it feels as if it is living, breathing, outside of your presence. That flow also stands in a stark contrast to Sable's movement; animation is being handled by Micah Holland, who has presented the character's steps as jagged as if she is in perpetual stumble – still trying to find her feet in the world around her, the world she has always called home but is still yet to truly discover.

While the visual design and animation might easily arrest the attention of anybody that lays eyes on it, there's still the question of what you actually *do* in the moment-to-moment play to answer. Shedworks is steadfast in its determination to classify *Sable* as an adventure game with a heart, and much of this stems from the primary motivation of the character. Much of this is funnelled through Sable's attire, something that will shift and change as you progress through the world and find the stories contained within it.

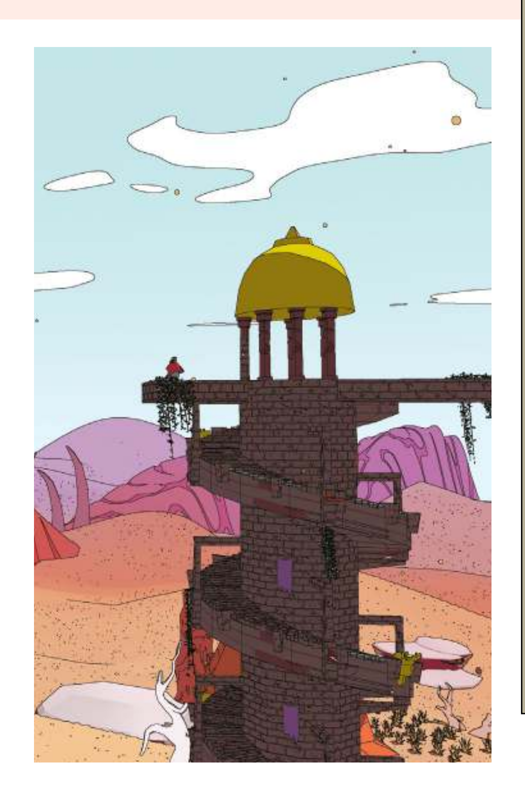
Over the course of our own lives, we might wear different metaphorical masks as a way of presenting ourselves to the outside world and eventually we might even settle upon a persona that feels right for who we want to be. In Sable's world, a mask isn't conceptual but physical, and much of the game is in trying to figure out what mask she will adopt as she carries herself into adulthood. "Everybody in this world wears a mask. It's a way for people to express who they are, what they do, maybe even the hierarchy of their family," explains Kythreotis, who goes on to note that for Sable a big part of this journey is to find the mask that best represents and expresses who she is as a person. Fineberg jumps in to clarify, "In a sense, the point of

Sable features no grand save-the-world story, nor does it have you establishing a new frontier. This is a world well lived in, and Sable is no hero, she's simply another person in the society, and this is a game about her drawing experience and lessons from those around her.

this journey *is* to learn about the world, but it's also to try on different masks, for you to go through the process with Sable, deciding what mask she wants to wear when she is a grown up."

In a sense, this is part of what makes Sable's journey so easy to identify with, even if its presentation is in itself foreign by nature. Of course, if she is to discover her place in the world – if she is to grow, understand and gain the experience necessary to define herself – she's going to need the guidance of others to help her make sense of it all. "What mask you wear might affect how people talk to you, how they perceive you," reveals Kythreotis. "It might affect certain things in the environment, some people might even decide that they don't want to talk to you if you associate yourself with one kind of people or one way of living. The way the world behaves and reacts to Sable will change based on how she presents herself."

All of this works to tie into the larger concept, as you, as Kythreotis puts it, begin to "choose what kind of stories you want to encounter… as you choose who you find and who you will engage with." Much of the game is experienced through speaking with the locals and exploring their surroundings, the path to adulthood and understanding revealing itself to you over time. "When you arrive in a new place the people will know why you are there and they will teach you things; they might teach you about the local area, about their culture, about their own values or their professions," adds Fineberg. "They will give you tasks to help teach you about things they may need help with. They might



STRUCTURED SOUNDS

Sable, with its evocative visual design and focus on calm open-world exploration, is quickly coming together as one of 2019's most promising independent titles. There is one final element that we are yet to discuss that ties the entire experience together, that of the sound design and score. While you're wandering around the desert sound can often be sparse, a decision that only helps to heighten the isolation that you feel, while still immersing you in the awesomeness of the world all around you. Occasionally, however, you will receive a jolt straight to the heart, a surge of emotional resonance courtesy of Michelle Zauner.

She's perhaps best known for her work as Japanese Breakfast, the critically acclaimed indie-pop creative. Zauner is handling the score for *Sable*, and she's doing an incredible job of bringing a new dynamic to the flow of play. Her ambient soundscape only emphasises how soothing, welcoming and beautiful the game world is. You can hear a track she recorded just for Sable's trailer, *Glider*, online now.

■ *80 Days* writer Meg Jayanth has come onto the project to assist Shedworks with its ambitious narrative. *Sable* is essentially an anthology of short stories pitched inside a large open world. We can't wait to see how all of these interconnect.

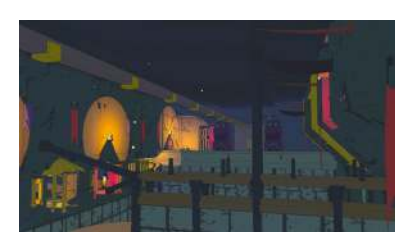
have masks to give you to help show that you've accomplished certain things or explored certain places. It's an opportunity for them to teach you about their lives and an opportunity for you to try on new masks, to see if they fit."

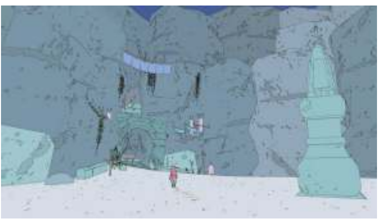
This can manifest itself in a variety of ways. One area we caught a glimpse of was an elaborate puzzle dungeon, one you might expect to find in *Ico* or *Rime*. If solving puzzles doesn't interest you then you can choose to ignore them, instead spending your time excavating ruins with the aid of your hoverbike or by simply taking the time to converse with the locals. "You don't have to do any activity that you don't want to do," Fineberg reasserts. "You can play the game in any sequence… for us, it is about people deciding which part of the world interests them the most and letting them chase what they want to see. If people encounter something that they don't like or is maybe a little too hard for them, they can just walk away from it and there's still an entire videogame to play – something else for them to find or something to capture their interest."

One of our big questions was whether combat would be an option in the game, and Shedworks was quick to dismiss the notion. "That's actually a big part of *Sable*, there is no combat in the game," says Fineberg, pausing for a moment as he leaps from a tall building, giving us the opportunity to see Sable enact a low-level hover ability to help guide her back down to safety. "In fact, there is no risk of death or fighting. We want the main motivation to be the story, the world and the people you meet along the way."

■ *Sable* looks, somehow, even better in motion than it does in screenshots. The use of colour and space is impressive, as too are the details and particle effects spread throughout. This is a game we can see ourselves getting lost in.

When it comes to the game's free-form structure and narrative flow, the two members of Shedworks were heavily inspired by games such as *Sunless Sea* and *80 Days*. They even went as far as to bring Meg Jaynath into the fold to handle the core threads of the narrative. "Meg is an incredible writer. She wrote *80 Days*, and that was a really big inspiration for how we wanted to structure our story," says Fineberg, before detailing how *Sable* works in practice. "You might arrive in a town, meet a new character and you'll share a little story with them or maybe you'll have the chance to trade an item or give them a gift. We want it to encourage making new stories and developing relationships with the characters."





How *Sable* will track these interactions Shedworks hasn't finalised, although it is likely to manifest itself both as a menu item and organically in the game world. "We need Sable to remember that she has met or heard about a character. She might arrive in a town, meet somebody and say, 'Oh, I met your cousin!' and that will change the conversation that you have with that person. It's a challenge that is always in our minds… thankfully that's something our writer has loads of experience with. That was a really big challenge in *80 Days* too; having Meg on board has been a really big help. She really gets it."

Sable feels like a passive rejection of science-fiction convention in videogames. It has actively sought to shun violence in favour of something more human and relatable. Shedworks is in the process of constructing something outwardly beautiful, with compassion and heart driving its core narrative structure and the gameplay systems that surround it. It's a game focused around you following your intuition and finding your place in the world around you, learning and growing as you do. *Sable* is, in so many ways, a unique prospect.

"From the beginning, every decision that we've made has been geared towards creating a sense of wonder and curiosity," Kythreotis tells us. "There will be times where you don't actively have anything to do, but we hope you will still have a reason to go out and explore, be it because you want to collect new parts or because you like the look of a ruin… maybe you find something special out in the desert and that develops into its own narrative," he says, trailing off, getting lost in the spectacle of some new vista Sable has stumbled across. "There isn't one big narrative here; in a way, it's a lot of short stories," says Fineberg, continuing where his development partner left off. "Whenever you feel like a story is finished you can just travel somewhere else and see what you find. *Sable* is a game of little vignettes; of peering through windows into other people's lives to see you can learn about yourself."

Reviews



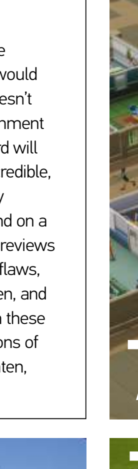
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SPIDER-MAN

Has Insomniac delivered the superhero game of the generation or has success slipped through its web?



THE AVERAGE



Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven and, of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale, nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest. We'd never let that happen, and besides, you'd smell it a mile off. Finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact. They are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists designed to enlighten, inform and engage – the gospel according to **games™**.













AGREE/DISAGREE?

games™ is always right. But that doesn't stop some people disagreeing. Think we've got a review horribly wrong? Or did we nail it?

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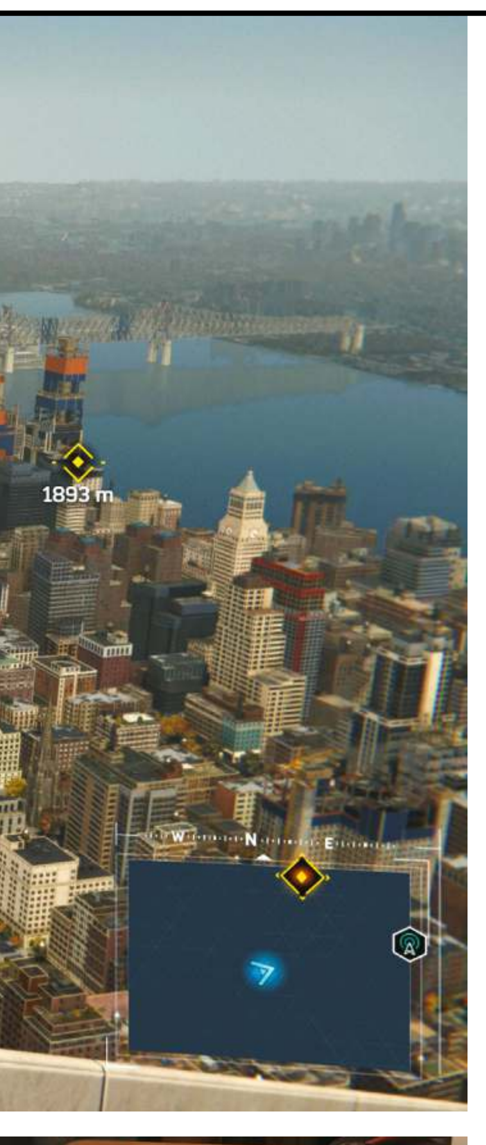

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NOT ONCE ARE YOU PULLED OUT OF CHARACTER BY BEING ASKED TO DO SOMETHING THAT FEELS ATYPICAL FOR THE HUMAN-SPIDER HYBRID

BUILDING A SPIDER-VERSE

Quite apart from the main narrative of the game that touches upon and references classic Spider-Man stories that will be well known to fans, Insomniac has done a great job of embedding lore into its collectables and interpretation of Manhattan so that die-hard Spidey-heads can get an extra kick out of unlocking every item and scouring every backstreet and corner of the world. The backpacks are probably the most obvious example of this, with items that not only give us a look at the past of this game's Peter Parker, but are also nods to events (sometimes even relatively obscure ones) from panels past. Failed tech, smashed lenses and more are often direct references to back issues. It's fan service that doesn't interfere with the main narrative experience, and we appreciate that.





A HERO WITH HEART

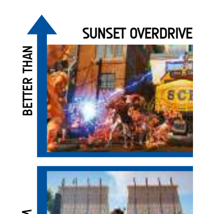
Spider-Man

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: Insomniac Games
PRICE: £54.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Left: The level of detail in the city is impressive, perhaps as much for the tricks it pulls to give New York more depth as for the real engine power underneath. Windows with room boxes inside give every building an improved sense of reality.



BETTER THAN
SUNSET OVERDRIVE



WORSE THAN
ASSASSIN'S CREED ORIGINS

Left: When the high-swinging hero business starts to get you down (as if it ever would), you can always hit the ground and go and meet your adoring public. Friendly neighbourhood superhero indeed.

The beauty of *Spider-Man* rests as much in what it doesn't do as what it does. It does embrace the idea of being Spider-Man; it doesn't do anything else. Every action, mission, side-quest and collectable feels governed by the question: "What would Spider-Man do?" By constantly returning to this point of reference, the resultant design is focused, well-honed and, crucially, makes you feel like Spidey more readily than any comic book game before it.

What Insomniac Games has proven here is that placing intelligent limitations on game design allows creators to drill wholly into what is important, heightening the experience through a small number of solidly and lavishly constructed pillars, as opposed to adopting the all-time common scattergun approach. Not once are you pulled out of character by being asked to do something that feels atypical for the human-spider hybrid, allowing you to suspend your disbelief and become Peter Parker, as opposed to feeling like a player playing as him.

This kind of performance play is rarely achieved by open-world games, as they struggle to legitimise their large environments by cramming in as much 'stuff' as possible, often corrupting the original intention and ending up transforming themselves into a boorish series of elaborate scavenger hunts for unrelated objects. Interactions here are split simply into combat and exploration, the details and contents of both fitting the space and the character as snuggly as a Spider-Suit. Thus, each element feels connected to the next.

Key to this cohesion, and the element that most readily links the presented combat and exploration challenges, is movement; the pacing and sensation of which is stunning in how well it imitates our understanding of Spider-Man's superhuman capacities from comics and movies. His web slinging is his quintessential differential as a character, and it seeps into everything you do here.

Success in combat, for instance, requires you to link attacks together into what is essentially a piece of freestyle dance, the final form of which is dictated by the number and type of enemies you're facing and whatever help you can improvise from the world around you. Kicks and punches chain into slides between enemy legs that expose their unguarded rear, and front flips and spins can be pulled off while simultaneously firing your web shooters at an incoming rocket and returning it to sender.

The sheer speed of Spider-Man's attacks and the fluidity with which every form of strike, dodge and web swing can be combined is mesmerising, and takes some getting used to. From the off, you're given enough tools to dominate your opposition if you're prepared to concentrate on keeping the tempo high, and subsequent skill-tree-centric unlocks only add to your arsenal down the line.

Crowd management is the aim of the game when it comes to staying healthy, with all non-boss enemies – wisely – choosing to swarm and surround you in an attempt to limit your options. There's no one-enemy-at-time-combat – à la various Bruce Lee movies – respite here. As such, it's as important to use Spider-Man's abilities as a means of controlling the space as it is a means of inflicting damage.

To prevent yourself being victimised by your opponent's superior numbers, you need to think of your abilities in a pluralistic manner. The web shooters that can snatch rockets out of the air are also used to pull manhole covers from the street, weapons from enemy hands and as a means of catapulting yourself towards foes in an attempt to narrow the space and prevent ranged attacks. You need to consider all of these options if you harbour any ambition of imitating the grace we know our avatar is capable of.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

COMIC REFERENCE: It's a small detail, but with so many cool costumes to unlock it might have been nice to have some details on their first appearance so we could seek out the comics they originated from (where applicable).

Disarming combatants early in a fight can save you later when your energy is low and any lucky shot will kill, and those manhole covers – when swung around your head – are perfect for stunning thugs just long enough for you to zip out of the main fray and reassess your approach.

This might all sound complex and difficult to pull off, but it's not. Indeed, it's all rather easy and straightforward to execute audacious combos given that a small number of buttons are used to employ a wide variety of contextually based actions. What you have to master is the timing and direction of those actions and whether you want to risk mastering a few or gaining a knowledge of them all.

Ease of access is key here. If combat was too difficult to engage with and you found yourself dying often or consistently unable to move fluidly between one move and the next,

then you wouldn't feel like Spider-Man at all. Importantly, this isn't a game in which Peter Parker becomes a superhero and is learning how to use his powers; this is a game in which he's a fully fledged defender of New York, and players of all skill levels need to be able to experience what that feels like in order for the premise to work. Even in those moments in which you're asked to slow down and pick off enemies by stealthily webbing them to walls or stringing them up from street lights, the abundance of on-screen cues informing you of whether or not it's safe to act means the pace can stay high if you choose it to.

Exploration enjoys the same ease of action but spectacle of result as combat, it being possible to look effortless in traversals of the city that are predominantly undertaken by swinging above the streets and between the skyscrapers. You don't need to aim and position your web for every swing, but the nature of the environment around you determines what you can do. With only the trees to cling to, moving through Central Park is a case of staying low to the ground, for example, while in the midst of Midtown and Times Square you can take flight as high as you like and experiment with more elaborate flips and dives.

It is not an exaggeration to say that there's not another open-world game that claims to prioritise speed and fluidity of movement that comes close to what Insomniac has pulled off with *Spider-Man*. One of the major reasons that the side missions and collectables are enjoyable to tick off is just how fun it is to move around the city. You'll want to complete those lists of collectables because it's great to have an excuse to glide above the sidewalks.

Narratively, however, the line snaps and those skyscraper highs are criminally lacking. There's a palpable clumsiness in how the plot fails to engage interestingly with its characters' personalities and desires, and the overall pacing is so haphazard that any attempt to create meaning from plot beats comes across as confused and amateurish. By the end of proceedings you feel as though the writing team didn't know what they wanted to say or how to say it.

This is especially disappointing given that there are some great individual scenes that in isolation successfully manage to blend both narrative and interactive intrigue into a seamless whole. The introduction of Mary Jane Watson is one such moment, setting up the character in an interesting way through multiple forms of gameplay, good dialogue and a believable combination of setting and goal.

Spider-Man's ending, too, is a moment the creators can be proud of, as it sends the game off in brilliantly over-the-top style while – finally – managing to instil some emotional resonance into a chief antagonist that suffers up until that point from incredibly crude and forced appearances.

The quality of the ending ultimately and most powerfully winds up acting as a symbol of potential lost, though. *Spider-Man* adheres to the traditional Hollywood three-act structure to such a degree that you'd be forgiven for thinking that it's a parody of the whole concept, with its three parts feeling more like separate stories than a means to control information release with a view to creating tension and intrigue.

In particular, the move from act two to three represents the kind of extreme shift that should be saved for sequels and spin-offs. At this juncture, a plethora of Spider-Man characters are released

FAQs

Q. A NEW SUPERHERO BENCHMARK?
Hard to say if it's better than the Arkham games; tastes vary on those. But it's certainly the best Spider-Man we've ever played.

Q. A GOOD LENGTH?
About 20 hours of main story to play through, but with exploration and collectables that gets beefed up considerably.

Q. FAVOURITE COSTUME?
All we wanted was a Scarlet Spider outfit, and we got it. We can't explain why that matters so much to us, but it does.



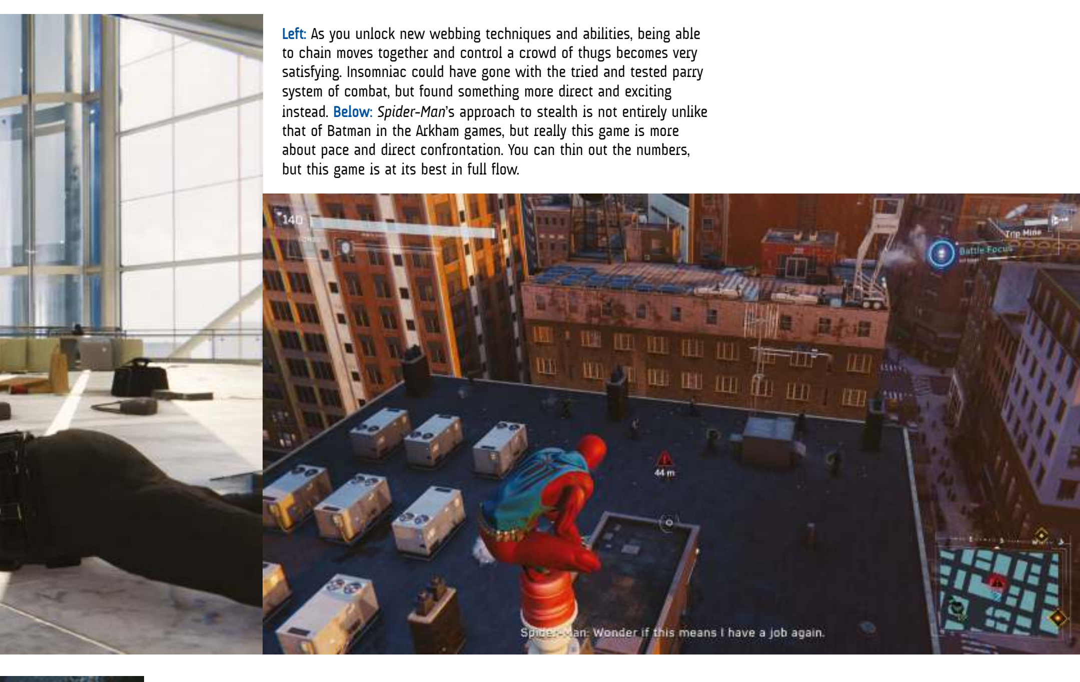
Below: We can't even begin to express how much it warms our hearts to see the Scarlet Spider costume in this game. It's a Nineties Spider-Man fan thing that is too convoluted to explain, but we love this outfit.





Right: There are a handful of sections where you play the game not as Spider-Man, but as Peter Parker, Mary Jane or others. These do a great job of not just changing up the pace, but also helping to put Spidey's skill set in better context.

ONE OF THE MAJOR REASONS THAT THE SIDE MISSIONS AND COLLECTABLES ARE ENJOYABLE TO TICK OFF IS JUST HOW FUN IT IS TO MOVE AROUND THE CITY



Left: As you unlock new webbing techniques and abilities, being able to chain moves together and control a crowd of thugs becomes very satisfying. Insomniac could have gone with the tried and tested parry system of combat, but found something more direct and exciting instead. **Below:** *Spider-Man*'s approach to stealth is not entirely unlike that of Batman in the Arkham games, but really this game is more about pace and direct confrontation. You can thin out the numbers, but this game is at its best in full flow.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

30 MINS



You should have the hang of swinging around already, and be enjoying the thrill of whipping through the streets of New York. That won't be going away anytime soon.

6 HOURS



Traversal will be second nature, but now the mastery of combat will come to the fore. Stringing together your moves, taking to the air and using the environment enhance your craft.

2 DAYS



You've probably settled on your favourite costume by now, and depending on how long you've spent in photo mode, you should be closing on the finish.

OLD SCHOOL SANDBOX

In many respects, *Spider-Man* feels like a throwback to a different era of sandbox game making. With its towers to activate and collectables to find, it is a game that leans on gamey mechanics rather than the more naturalistic, emergent world elements of some more recent open exploration experiences. In fact, we would say that it has more in common with something like *Crackdown* than titles such as *Assassin's Creed Origins* or *Breath Of The Wild*. But interestingly, that doesn't feel like a bad thing. There's a fresh-faced innocence, perhaps embellished by the overall tone of the game and personality of Peter Parker, to the whole game that helps to lift it above its more well-trodden or trope-adjacent mechanics. Like finding orbs in *Crackdown*, getting all of the collectables not only gives you rewards, but is fun to do in itself thanks to the strengths of the core features of the game.



into the story in a way that is as heavy-handed as could be, their appearance undermining the character conflicts and relationships that had up until that point taken the spotlight. The plot is spent spinning into its own web of meaninglessness as it tries to manage everything that it suddenly finds itself having to wrap up in its final act.

Such is the ungainliness of the pacing that you can't help but think that the script changed multiple times during production, and there was no consistent consensus on how the story was going to reach its conclusion. Either that or the game was originally designed to include more plot beats in the final third than it did as a means to believably incorporate the bloated cast.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

HUMAN PENDULUM: Getting the swinging right for this game was pretty much the beginning and end of what Insomniac needed to get absolutely right, and it nailed the mechanic. The rollercoaster feel is spot-on.

Spider-Man's characterisation manages to survive the confusion, but only because of the fact that the mechanics do such a wonderful job of defining him. If you remove those and focus only on the narrative then it's actually Mary Jane, 'MJ', presented as more than the usual sidekick love interest, who is most interesting.

Where Peter Parker is a naive, innocent idealist who is too childlike to look head-on at his emotions, MJ is adaptable, reflective and always looking for the alternative approach. While Spider-Man tries to control it, she's the one who best embodies and reflects the chaotic world around her and seeks to understand it.

In a sense she's the everyday New Yorker of the sort the city advertises itself on: smart, tough, inventive, romantic and always ready to lend a hand in a crisis. She deals with the responsibility of knowing Spider-Man's real identity, and she's the one who provides the support and ideas that he so badly needs to get the job done. Without her, he couldn't exist as a hero. He'd simply be a kid with cool moves.

It's a good thing those moves are so cool, then, because MJ isn't around all of the time. Despite its problems in storytelling, *Spider-Man* achieves its primary goal of making you feel like the titular character. In a way even more impressive than the lauded Batman Arkham series, this is a game that takes the boundaries defined by the relevant pop culture and uses them to build an experience that reflects its heroes sensibilities and tropes brilliantly. If it could add some of Batman's storytelling nuance then it would be even more deserving of praise.

Hopefully, what Insomniac has achieved here will stand as a lesson to other open-world creators in why it's so important to build your world, and everything in it, around your character – as opposed to creating a character to fit your world. Everything you can do here is positioned to celebrate Spider-Man's abilities, and that means everything you can do makes you feel like Spider-Man.

VERDICT 8/10
DOES EVERYTHING A SPIDER CAN

A CURE FOR WHAT AILS YOU

Two Point Hospital

Make no bones about it, this is *Theme Hospital* 2.0. Within seconds of booting up the game you'll find yourself back in 1997, the Bullfrog logo sketching itself into your mind and the chainsaw-wielding doctor's balding visage flooding into your mind's eye. Even the tone of *Two Point Hospital*'s intro and its characters harkens back to a time when tycoon games weren't just feasible products, they were *in demand*.

It pays such close homage to its inspiration that we should by all rights be criticising it. From the grid-based room construction to the quirky machines to cure equally quirky ailments, *Two Point Hospital* does nothing that *Theme Hospital* didn't already. Had this game released around the second millennium we'd be scathing right now, writing about how much of a carbon copy it is. But this is 2018 and, despite the similarities, it's just pleasant to be back in the warm, comforting embrace of a game that mixes humour, broad appeal and deep business simulation.

And this isn't to say that there are absolutely no improvements to the gameplay. The core elements remain the same, starting out with a reception desk and assistant alongside a GP's office before adding to and expanding the hospital with various contraptions, treatments and the janitors to maintain them all. None of that needs to change, instead it's more subtle things that make the difference.

Take, for example, room construction, which is still tied to cubic, grid-based layouts, but can now be obtuse shapes to allow for more control over the design of the rooms and the hospital as a whole. There's still a size requirement for each room that dictates their base design and positioning, but if you're looking to build a prestigious hospital then this extra, slight malleability is a significant boon. Room prestige boosts the happiness of those working inside, and naturally the value and quality of your hospital.

It's this sort of numbers game that underpins *Two Point Hospital*. The meta has

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: Two Point Studios
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 64-bit OS, Intel i3 or AMD FX-4350 CPU, 4GM RAM, 2GB GPU, 5GB disk space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
ZOO TYCOON

AS GOOD AS

THEME HOSPITAL



Above: Building a room feels much like *Theme Hospital*, but with a greater variety of items to place – some more relevant than others. It's also a much more involved process. This is especially important if you want to improve your reputation and prestige.

Below: There's a wide variety of contraptions specifically designed to solve just one ailment, but psychiatry, pharmaceuticals and rest in a ward remain staples, too. There isn't an over-reliance on these humorous illnesses, so you can plan an effective hospital.

AS YOU PLAY YOU'LL BEGIN TO DISCOVER WHERE YOU'RE GOING WRONG, AND THE NEXT ATTEMPT WILL RUN SO MUCH MORE EFFECTIVELY



FAQs

Q. A LOT OF CONTENT?
That depends on how you define it, but you'll certainly get many hours out of the game taking on its various challenges.

Q. SO NOT MANY LEVELS?
On the contrary, 15 hospitals and no doubt more as DLC in the future. But with multiple objectives to achieve three stars, you'll lose nights to it.

Q. ADDICTIVE?
Absolutely. It gets that balance of always having something to fix, improve or work towards that is necessary for the genre to play just right.

Below: Hospitals can end up being quite sprawling, and poor planning can lead to frustrated patients, emergencies and even death.



KEEP THE DOCTOR AWAY

There are so many more ailments to deal with here than there ever were in *Theme Hospital*. While this means there are ultimately many more rooms to build – variety is the spice of life and all that – there is a greater level of depth here that can quite easily be overlooked. Certain levels will provide a greater number of certain types of patients, and you can play it as intended. But combine it with the ability to adjust prices and hiring a stellar marketing team and you'll find you can adjust the balance, whether that's to earn more from the large influx of a particular type of illness or to draw in a broader range of patients and therefore reduce waiting times. There's a lot more to *TPH* when you look under the hood.

been brought to the forefront, with close attention needed for items that bolster some function or value by a matter of slight percentages. The staff system is a great example of this, where rather than being restricted to just hiring a GP, psychiatrist or surgeon for specialist work, now doctors can learn traits that – alongside their own innate characteristics – help them work better within particular areas. A General Practitioner skill will boost a doc's effectiveness in the GP office by 10 per cent, for instance, but add in various levels of the Diagnosis skill and they'll become a savant for silly sicknesses.

And this isn't just the case for doctors, either. Nurses can improve their skills in pharmacy management, bedside manner or what have you. Even the 'lesser' roles can take on more tasks with *Two Point Hospital*, making even these overlooked positions deeper and more valuable to the overall experience: assistants can staff cafes or a marketing department. Even the janitor can improve their abilities in maintenance, repairing or ghostbusting – that last one being a novel addition.

There's no denying that the sense of humour has been transplanted directly from Bullfrog's heritage, from the eclectic ailments based on ridiculous puns or the constant jabbering of the receptionist that will offer the same sort of smirks as *Theme Hospital*'s. The addition of radio presenters, humorously flawed staff photos or other such little touches bring their own unique additions to this particular brand of comedy, balanced well to ensure that it never feels like it's trying too hard and keeps things feeling lighthearted throughout.

But the biggest success of *Two Point Hospital* is that once the comedy stops managing to land – and at some point it will simply by virtue of repetition – it still remains compelling and fulfilling to play. Part of this is in the design of the levels: a smooth gradient that eases players into its mechanics and systems and always gives something new to learn or a challenge to overcome. The addition of a three-tier star system and in-level objectives will have those that get involved with the business sim side of things a little more to chew on, too.

But the real reason that *Two Point Hospital* gets its hooks into you is that it isn't long before it's clear that being passive about the decision-making process simply won't be enough; even a few stages in you'll quickly find patients dropping like lightbulb-headed flies and the cash reserves repeatedly plummeting into the red. It's not that *Two Point Hospital* is unfairly difficult, but it takes some failure to properly grasp what works. As you play you'll begin to discover where you're going wrong, and the next attempt will run so much more effectively: staff will be hired more studiously, trained more accordingly, rooms will be built sensibly, and items placed more logically within them.

This happens with regularity throughout the campaign, too, giving you so much more to learn and even more to go back and perfect. *Two Point Hospital* is a recreation of *Theme Hospital*, sure, but modern in all the ways that it needed to be, and not without the necessary depth that could've been lost if it had a misaligned focus on tongue-in-cheek humour.

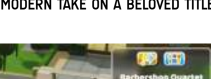
More than anything it has proven not only that business management games can be in demand again, but shown Two Point Studios to be a developer sensitive to the reasons why these games were popular to begin with. It might be presumptuous right now, but we're already holding out hope for *Two Point Funpark*, *Two Point Zoo* or even *Two Point God*.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

BULLISH: It's something of a catch-22, but while *Two Point Hospital* succeeds largely because of the love for *Theme Hospital*, there is a sense that it could've done a little bit more to distance itself from Bullfrog's classic.


VERDICT 9/10


A MODERN TAKE ON A BELOVED TITLE




The world feels wonderfully organic, and traversing from one area to the next is a feast for the eyes as the camera regularly pans to give cinematic views of the remarkable locations, from fields rich with flora and fauna to glowing underground caverns.

TIME CHANGES EVERYTHING

Planet Alpha

In the vast majority of interactive adventures, the world revolves around you. Your virtual counterpart routinely has a plethora of virtual personalities wholly invested in their plight and eagerly hanging on their every word. This customary facet is surprisingly absent in *Planet Alpha*. Here, you are a tiny spec, a largely unnoticed presence on a vast alien planet. You witness key events, but you are the mere spectator of a story set on a much grander scale than your own personal struggle for survival. It's refreshingly divergent and just one of the ways that *Planet Alpha* offers a unique sci-fi platforming adventure.

Another, and more obvious, deviance from the norm comes courtesy of the game's striking art style. The stunning visuals and vibrant colour palette bring this world, and the curious creatures that inhabit it, to life in a spectacular way. Unfortunately, as breath-taking as they are, these beautiful environments can be problematic when it comes to platforming. The very nature of the visuals can make it hard to distinguish a perilous pitfall or decipher an enemy's presence, especially in areas where the foreground is littered with sumptuous scenery.

This wouldn't be such an issue if each and every misstep in *Planet Alpha* didn't result in your instant demise. Every jump requires pinpoint precision and you need near inhuman reflexes to avoid falling between the cracks of a concealed crater, or to escape unscathed when you unexpectedly stumble into an enemy's field of vision.

It's not overly punishing, as checkpoints are used generously, but the game's excessive affinity for offing the player does stifle the flow of exploration and diminishes the thrill of the otherwise spectacular set-pieces and solid platforming.

As you explore, you gain the ability to rotate the planet and manipulate its day and night cycle. This adds a unique puzzle mechanic that changes the environment, allowing impassable areas to be traversed by cycling to the appropriate time. For instance, the sun can cause a flower to bloom, which can bridge a large gap or distract a pesky bug.

While most of the puzzles are fairly obvious and involve a simple mix of moving blocks and scrolling to the appropriate hour, there are some inspired conundrums that require more creativity to conquer.

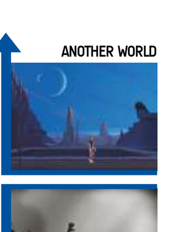
The platforming is interspersed with stealth sections that see you attempt to navigate through areas without being spotted by this planet's robotic invaders. Evasion requires extremely accurate timing and even the slightest sighting will instantly net you a one-way ticket to oblivion. As with the platforming, most of the fun is lost by the game being far too particular.

Its inventive ideas and stunning visuals propel *Planet Alpha* into the stratosphere. Unfortunately, however, unrefined gameplay and frequently unresponsive controls cause this otherworldly adventure to come crashing back down to earth.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One, Switch
ORIGIN: Denmark
PUBLISHER: Team 17
DEVELOPER: Planet Alpha ApS
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN — ANOTHER WORLD



WORSE THAN — LIMBO



FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

ON POINT: Due to creator Adrian Lazar's lack of programming knowledge, the game is largely created using Unreal Engine's Blueprints Visual Scripting system, a node-based interface, rather than more traditional programming methods.

VERDICT 5/10

UNIQUE IDEAS HAMPERED BY FINICKITY GAMEPLAY

BEAUTIFUL GAME, AWFUL FRAME

PES 2019





Above: Man Blue return, as do Man Red and London FC. The lack of official licenses doesn't affect the quality of football, but they do – at the risk of sounding shallow – undermine the overall spectacle, plus highlight the lack of quality presentation on offer.

Continuing a trend that has defined the series in recent years, *PES 2019* brings joy on the field while wholly disappointing off of it. It's the Diego Maradona of football games if we're being generous. The Jamie Vardy if we're not.

There's a beautiful fluidity in the movement and actions of the players, a feeling that nothing is being corrupted or guided by underlying algorithms that are robbing you of your freedom to fully express yourself. Passing is crisp and playful, the ball going where your kick determines as opposed to being magically, magnetically pulled in by your intended recipient. Shooting is rewarding thanks to its diversity, while dribbling requires a careful touch to prevent the ball slipping from your feet.

Physics of this kind require you to be careful with how you play, with that same potential for variety of action manifesting itself equally as potential for failure. Get too cocky and you'll lose possession constantly; play too conservatively and you'll fail to outwit the opposition.

Rather than focusing overly on player-specific animations designed to make Ronaldo look like Ronaldo when he's taking a freekick or Neymar look like Neymar when rolling around holding his ankle, *PES 2019* takes a wider view and sets out to interpret football as a fuller, more rounded entity. The way the ball and players move mean you can embrace various tactical approaches, from counter-attacks to dominating possession.

Nothing feels pre-scripted, allowing you to write your own stories and create your own sense of team dynamics and individual player impact. This means that no two matches ever feel the same and warms you with a sense of possibility if you're having to make last gasp changes in a desperate bid to save a result.

But then, there's everything else. The off-field action does its best to destroy any goodwill you had stored up. Master League mode, in which you play as and manage a team, hasn't seen a meaningful design upgrade in years. Exhibition match options remain limited and myClub is still very much English Football League, whereas FIFA Ultimate Team is Premier League.

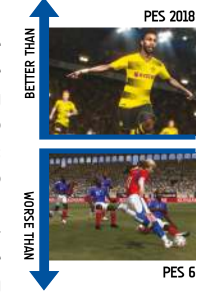
Presentation is shockingly old-fashioned. Genuinely. Shocking. Menus are so box-heavy that you would be forgiven for thinking that you're playing a warehouse simulator. The route you have to take to execute some simple tasks is a massive chore until you've memorised a mental map of the journey.

It's becoming tiring to present the same PES verdict every season – great football, terrible user experience. Worse still, the fixes required are so obvious that it is even more frustrating to see them overlooked year after year.

It's wonderful that Konami is focusing on the football as a priority, but that doesn't mean it's okay to accept substandard offerings elsewhere. What's here is akin to a beautiful painting presented via the most ill-fitting, obnoxious frame. Come back for the same review next year.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Konami
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £54.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4 (2-22 Online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

UGLY DUCKLING: Serious overhaul of game modes, menus and general presentation is badly needed and has been for many years. PES 2019 is miles behind the competition in this regard.



VERDICT 8/10

STUNNING ON THE FIELD, AWFUL EVERYWHERE ELSE.

Below: The football is slick and smooth, allowing you to play intricate passes of the kind that Guardiola and Klopp would be proud of. Best of all is the fact that Konami's approach to gameplay allows you to implement a wide range of tactical ideas.







It looks quite pretty at least, with bright and colourful environments to explore.

ALL TOO FAMILIAR

Strange Brigade

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, Xbox One
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Rebellion
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4 Online
MINIMUM SPEC: 64-bit Windows 7, 10. AMD Ryzen 3 2200G or Intel CPU Core i3-2100, 4 GB RAM, AMD Radeon HD 7870 (2GB) or NVIDIA GeForce 750 Ti (2GB), 35GB available space
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Above: The puzzles are pretty simple and mostly just involve shooting whatever's glowing.

***Strange Brigade* is a co-op shooter about a secret British organisation that is fighting the curse of an ancient Egyptian witch.** It's not going to set the world on fire, but it does the core fundamentals well enough to make for a fun co-op shooter. It's just a shame about everything else that the game has to offer.

Let's start with the positives though. Shooting, while very simple, feels solid. As a shooter, *Strange Brigade* handles well. It has an arsenal of chunky, satisfying weapons and even manages to make movement, dodging and melee attacks satisfying alongside them. This is matched by decent enemy variety, with all sorts of nasties requiring you to locate different weak spots, plus choose which foe to prioritise and how to herd as many of them into traps as possible. In the moment to moment of combat, *Strange Brigade* works perfectly well, it just never excels in any area.

Co-op elevates it at least. There are four unique characters to choose from and having friends along for the fight spices up the chaotic battles, even if it does take away some of the challenge. Playing alone winds up too dull to recommend though, so joining forces with pals is a must.

Shooting is mixed up with some puzzles, though they're strictly of the match the tile and pipemania variety, so not exactly demanding much thought. Still, they're a nice way to break up what is fundamentally shooting endless waves of baddies.

All the hard work that's gone into making a breezy shooter is then undone by everything else. The Thirties period setting is mined for exoticism and "tally ho!" adventure, playing off British imperialism in Africa for laughs in a way that leaves a bad taste in the mouth. Presumably the inclusion of Maasai warrior Nalangu is to balance things out. However, as the only non-British member of the team – who is shockingly uncritical of joining the forces that subjugated her homeland (the Mau Mau Uprising would occur only 20 years after the time of the game) – it feels like a shallow, token gesture.

Even if you're willing to take it all at face value, though, you'll have to stomach the insufferable narrator. His jovial British mockery is tiresome from the very first line and yet he is constantly speaking, even interrupting, to introduce new enemies and plot developments. It's hard to tell if the curse you're fighting is that of the witch or of the incessant narrator. We know which we'd sooner turn our guns on.

Really though, if it weren't for its frustrations, *Strange Brigade* wouldn't be all that remarkable at all. What we have then is a fun but disposable co-op shooter built on a problematic premise with an unbearable narrator.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

NO NARRATION: Not only is the game's jolly British narrator unbearable, he's completely unnecessary. The game already delivers on the Thirties adventure style it's going for and the characters are lively enough.

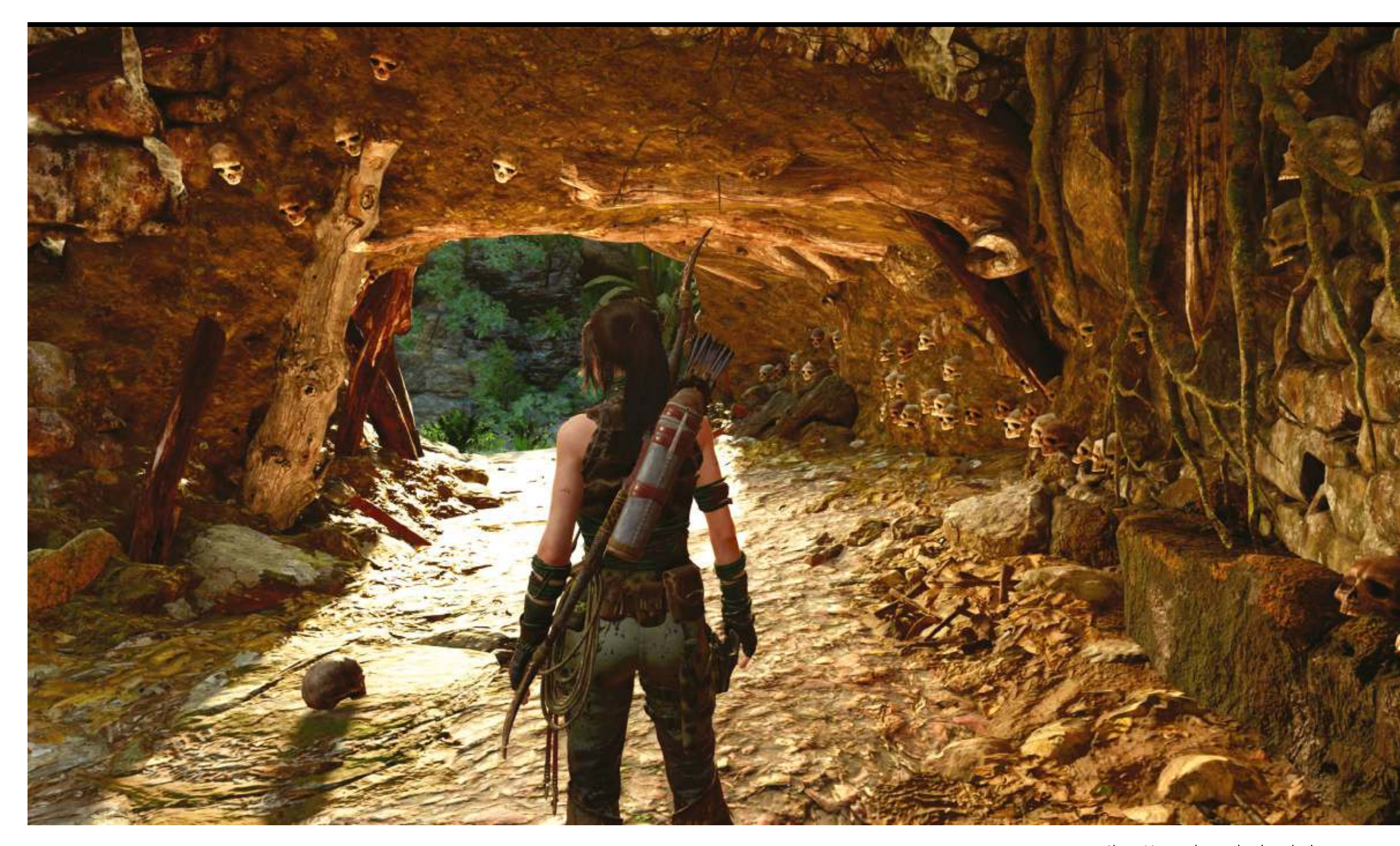
BETTER THAN: SNIPER ELITE: NAZI ZOMBIE ARMY



WORSE THAN: VERMINTIDE II


VERDICT 5/10

FUN BUT NOT DARING ENOUGH TO BE MEMORABLE



Above: It's tempting to give the animal dens a wide berth (not least because your first encounter with an angry jaguar is not remotely enjoyable). Don't be put off, though; some contain hidden archivist maps and loot within.

WE HAD A LARA FUN

Shadow Of The Tomb Raider

Lara Croft makes a mistake. It's an almighty – cataclysmic, even – error of judgment, but perhaps one we've been expecting. After all, we've spent many years in Croft's company, and we've seen firsthand how audacious she can be. For an archaeologist, she's peculiarly cavalier about the people and places her adventures destroy along the way, and cares little for the centuries-old architecture that crumbles beneath her scrambling feet, or dissolves in a hail of bullets. Croft's dogged recklessness continually endangers not just herself, but those around her, too.

This is what's so refreshing about *Shadow Of The Tomb Raider* (*SOTTR*). That error unleashes tangible, fatal consequences for those unfortunate enough to be outside of Croft's immediate circle, and we witness firsthand the impact of Lara's selfishness. *SOTTR* not only presents a Lara that doesn't always make the right choice, but also one that's not always entirely likeable.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: Eidos Montreal
PRICE: £54.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

For much of *SOTTR*, Croft tries desperately to atone for those early reckless acts. Picking up just a couple of months after *Rise Of The Tomb Raider* left off, this time Croft's in South America to take down Trinity, the paramilitary organisation we've encountered before, BFF Jonah once again in tow.

Yes, it's a familiar story, with many familiar mechanics, too, but there are subtle but meaningful changes here. Whereas her previous stories were chiefly solitary adventures, in *SOTTR* Croft must meet, converse with, and ultimately try to help the indigenous people that live in and around the magnificent temples that she's so hellbent on plundering. The people and places of Paititi (which is based upon a real legend of a lost Inca city, incidentally) personify the mythos and yet that doesn't prevent her from barging into their homes and rifling through their meager belongings.

WITH ITS LUSH VEGETATION AND INFINITIVE NOOKS AND CRANNIES, IT'S DIFFICULT NOT TO GET LOST IN CROFT'S SURROUNDINGS – BOTH FIGURATIVELY AND LITERALLY

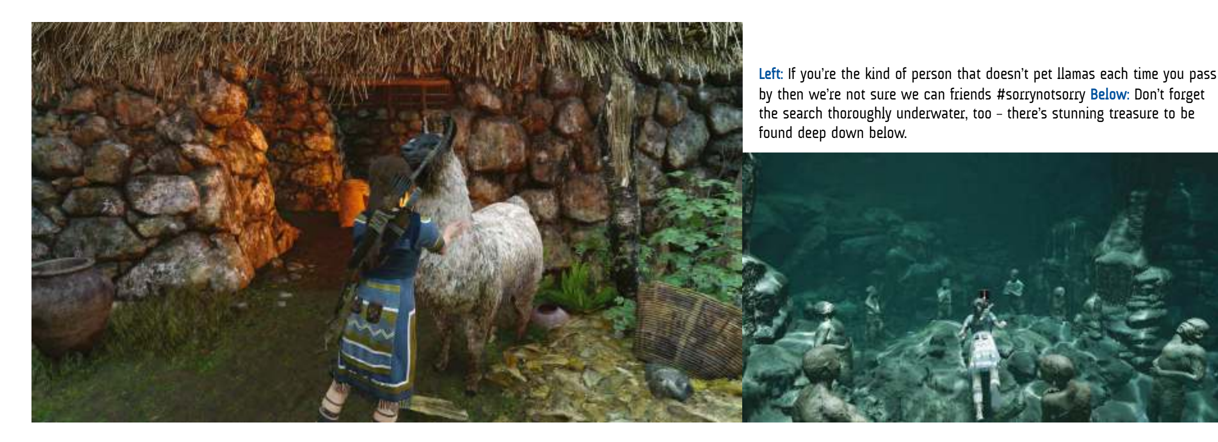
We're suckers for Lara's world, though, and everything stuffed within it. Eidos Montreal paints stunning vistas, ripe for exploration and discovery. With its lush vegetation, craggy cliff-faces and infinitive nooks and crannies, it's difficult not to get lost in Croft's surroundings – both figuratively and literally – and harder still to stay on-task when it keeps tempting you back. And while it does, admittedly, feel similar to past adventures despite the change of scenery, the magic of *Shadow Of The Tomb Raider* lies not in its cast or even its story, but in the world crafted to support those things.

FAQs

Q. HAVE TO HUNT?
Nope! While it's admittedly quicker to level up by taking down the most elusive beasts, many common hides can be found in the villages and among survival caches.

Q. WHERE'S THE SHOTGUN/ LOCKPICK/WHATEVER?
Raise your eyes to the skies for the prize, and ensure you complete side missions to unlock specialist equipment.

Q. SKILL TREE PRIORITIES?
The sooner you level up Croft's swimming capabilities the easier your life will be, trust us.



Left: If you're the kind of person that doesn't pet llamas each time you pass by then we're not sure we can friends #sorrynotsorry **Below:** Don't forget the search thoroughly underwater, too – there's stunning treasure to be found deep down below.

Right: Pay attention to what Lara does with her weapons. When you trigger a cutscene that sees Croft carefully unpack her guns and holster them, be alert – it means you're not alone, not even in seemingly empty challenge tombs.

And as stunning as Croft's world is to see, *SOTTR's* audio design is nothing short of astonishing. Play with headphones, and the 3D directional sound will firmly cement you in the moment.

It feels more compact and more linear than previous games, but there's still a significant amount to do, both within the main story missions and outside it. The tombs, as ever, are *SOTTR's* masterpieces. While perhaps not quite as head-scratchingly opaque as the first reboot's environmental puzzles, Croft's tomb exploration remains the game's biggest, and most enjoyable, draw.

Again, it feels there's not quite enough of them, and again they're not always super generous with the help prompts, but puzzle progress saves even if you abandon a tomb challenge – a delightful touch that doesn't penalise you for rage-quitting part way through.

While exploration outweighs combat, you will still have to battle your way through several firefights. Most are easily surmountable, with handy props – and latterly, skills, too – that help you make the most of your environment, especially as Lara can use trees, mud, and even old bottles and cans to her advantage, her awareness boosted by her "survival instinct" mode. On just a couple of occasions, though, you'll be swamped by enemies, and it's these battles – particularly those that restrict your arsenal to simply your bow – that are the most difficult to overcome.

The grim death spasms remain, of course. We wish they didn't. *SOTTR's* story campaign may be modest in length, but to complete the game in its entirety you will spend countless hours with Croft. To watch her repeatedly smash her face into a rock, be ripped apart by wolves, or impaled by spikes – a punishment caused by your misstep – feels as unnecessarily violent as it is gratuitous. Occasionally, though, you might find Croft's plummy tones grate on you, especially as she talks down to indigenous townsfolk, but sometimes she'll irritate you when she's alone, too. In one tomb challenge, the help prompt – and we're using that term loosely – insists she must "orientate the boom" without clarifying for the non-sailors amongst us what the hell a boom is. PSA, Lara: not everyone's sailed a yacht before.

Technically, it's far from flawless, too. Several times we were plagued by stuttering sound and on more than one occasion the screen froze for several seconds, throwing up a curious "WAIT FOR STREAMING" message. The grapple axe is a curious beast that at times wanders off wherever it wants, but there's no doubt that organic exploration has been improved by *SOTTR's* refined difficulty setting that allows you to tone down – or brighten up – the telltale white splashes that guide your traversal as you rappel, wall run, and climb around.

Completion tempts you with New Game+, but it's to Crystal Dynamics' credit that even when given the chance to jump back into the game anew, retaining your arsenal, you may not want to. The generous fast travel system – activated by the base camps you'll find sprinkled throughout the world – mean that doubling back rarely feels laborious, and with plenty of collectables secreted away in the most hellish of places, there's always a reason to jump back to get "just one more" item, only to find you've lost three hours just meandering through the wondrous Peruvian jungle.

Brace yourself: you're also going to abuse that photo mode.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

TOMB RAGER: While challenge tombs are ostensibly optional, don't forget them: some skills can only be unlocked by completing these fiendish puzzles.

OFF THE BEATEN PATH

There's a temptation here to jump into the story and keep on truckin' but take our advice: don't rush it. There's so much to be gained by exploring the world beyond the immediate storyline, and some of it – including some incredibly useful tools that'll help you enter otherwise inaccessible areas – can only be gained by taking time to talk to the townsfolk and merchants, and helping them out with side missions. You'll also learn that the hidden location of many secret relics and documents will only be unveiled by chatting to the locals, too, so don't be afraid to get friendly with the neighbours. The more time you spend with them, the more treasures you'll unearth.

BETTER THAN

RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER

WORSE THAN



UNCHARTED 4

VERDICT 7/10

A RICH, VIBRANT WORLD DESPITE ITS LACKLUSTRE CAMPAIGN

OMNISCIENT HENCHMEN OF THE WORLD: UNITE!

Phantom Doctrine

Relearn what you know about turn-based strategy combat if you're going to give *Phantom Doctrine* a go – if you enter thinking this is *XCOM 2*, that you can hole up and take down wave upon wave of bad buggers and emerge the victorious hero, you're going to end up with a lot of compromised spies in your Cabal, or a bunch of corpses in the street instead of busy hands working in the forgery lab.

While *Phantom Doctrine* espouses stealthy approaches in its missions, entering each encounter with agents unrecognised or in disguise, able to disconnect security cameras and laser-fence alarms, combat is an inevitability. We start by talking about this because it is so initially jarring, and it is the kind of thing that will immediately put off a fair few players who have come to expect a different manner of placing your people and blasting away. Instead *Phantom Doctrine* does a good job of, when things go hot, creating a world where chaos reigns; where escaping by the skin of your teeth is the best success you can hope for at times.

It's exhilarating at its best moments, and the sort of thing that conjures up stories fitting in nicely with the spy thrillers that so clearly influence the game – as long as you get past that initial jarring realisation that, yes, you are actually outnumbered and yes, it does matter.

Anyway, *Phantom Doctrine* comes from CreativeForge Games, the Polish outfit behind the decent-but-flawed turn-based *Hard West*. And it's… better than the wild west themed title, while at the same time being absolutely more of the same – a series of good ideas, some carried off well, most leaving a feeling that something's lacking; or sometimes irritating to the very core. It's good at times, great rarely (those skin-of-the-teeth moments we mentioned), and worth a pop for genre completionists – but that's about as far as the praise can realistically go.

Set during the Cold War – though not specifically about it – *Phantom Doctrine* has you controlling 'the Cabal', a team of agents operating outside of either the US's CIA or USSR's KGB, depending on the side chosen at the game's start.

On a mission to unravel a global conspiracy by a shadowy caba… *organisation* known as the Beholder Initiative, you send agents around the globe, chat to informants, disrupt enemy agent activities, and generally Do Spy Stuff. On paper, it's thrilling and interesting and suits the very XCOM set up nicely. You've got a base to manage, in which you can outfit your agents, assign them new identities should they have been compromised, research new tech, implant your agents with body modifications to make them better than regular humans, and interrogate/execute/brainwash captured enemy agents.

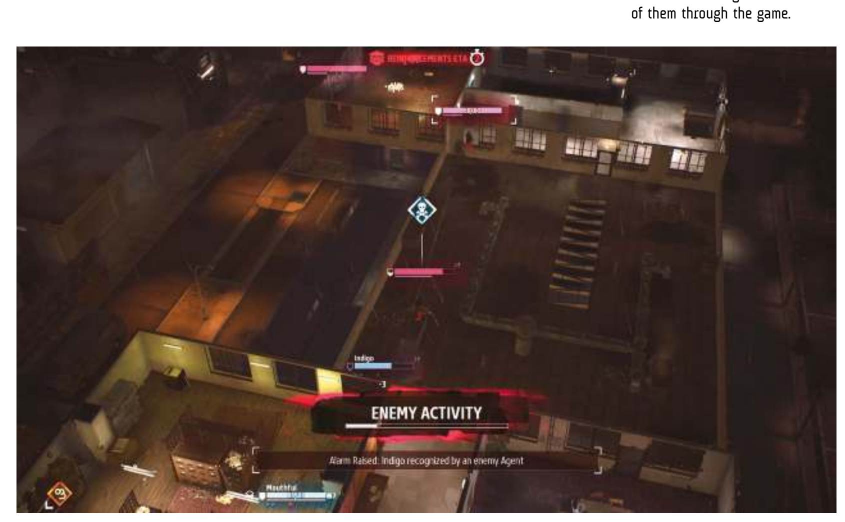
This section is well thought out, and the MK Ultra (brainwashing clinic) part is genuinely great, allowing you to code enemies to turn to your side during a mission with a keyphrase being spoken. Yet it ends up shallow, and soon enough you'll end up with nothing to do beyond basic busywork.

Taking yourself to the world map, you're tasked with keeping an eye on the world's

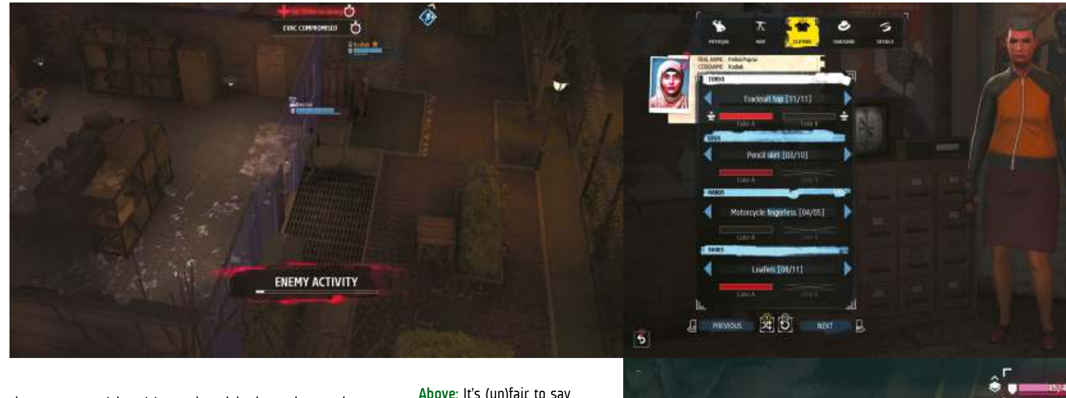
DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PC
ORIGIN: Poland
PUBLISHER: Good Shepherd Entertainment
DEVELOPER: CreativeForge Games
PRICE: £31.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Right: The investigations board is genuinely good fun, even if it's a rather simple case of 'find the code/place name, match it to another of the same'. It breaks up some of the monotony, and we found ourselves wishing for more of them through the game.



Above: Your team gets itself into trouble so frequently, and is so often split up and uninvolved, that it's really hard to form a bond with any of them. There's no *XCOM*-alike tears for a fallen trooper, especially as they rarely actually die.



Above: It's (un)fair to say *Phantom Doctrine* is a game made by a small team on a small budget – it looks and sounds the part.
Right: Voice acting through the game varies between passable – because we don't speak Russian – ignorable, and downright awful.

THERE'S A FINE LINE BETWEEN WELCOME DIFFICULTY AND GENUINE UNFAIRNESS, AND PHANTOM DOCTRINE TRIPS OVER IT MORE THAN A FEW TIMES



FAQs

Q. WHAT'S A PHANTOM DOCTRINE?
Well in this case, it's getting at the fact neither the US nor USSR governments are actually in charge of world affairs.

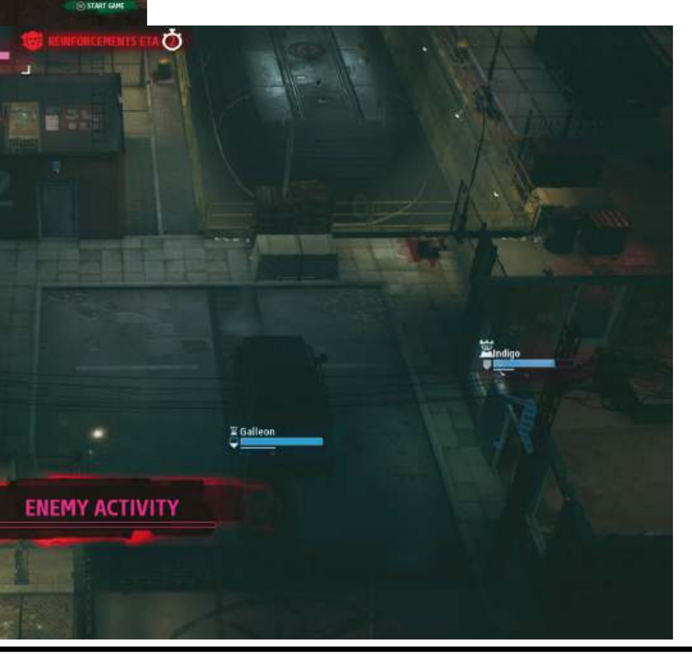
Q. EAST VS WEST?
No, *Phantom Doctrine* is set during the Cold War, but doesn't actually tackle the US/Soviet conflict, aside from a few mentions.

Q. IRONMAN MODE?
Of course, but you'll really need to think twice about engaging it. *Phantom Doctrine* frequently jumps from 'hard' to 'unfair'.

BE AWARE

Phantom Doctrine doesn't deal much in the realms of chance and the behind-the-scenes dice rolls of its contemporaries. Instead there's more of a focus on 'awareness' – a power bar beneath an agent/enemy's health which, when full, gives them the opportunity to dodge attacks, or take less damage. As such you quickly learn to keep your awareness topped up throughout the game, holding off on your more powerful attacks, which consume it to instead leave it up as a defensive shield of wakefulness.

It's a novelty, and once you've got to grips with it the system makes sense, but really it just puts that random dice roll element out there in front of you, rather than fundamentally changing anything. Which is nice shorthand for the entire game, come to think of it.



suspicious affairs. This means sending agents to cities around the globe, choosing to interact – or not – with Beholder activity, unlock informants, gather information, and generally build a picture of where you need to go and what you need to do next. It's brilliant… on paper. In practice, it's a lot of basic menu choices and watching a clock tick until the next thing happens.

Then there's the missions – the meat of *Phantom Doctrine*, and the area in which it falls apart the most, sadly. It's functional, no doubt about it, and genre stalwarts will be right at home initially (until combat breaks out, as we mentioned). Infiltration can be fun, when it's not been procedurally generated to be impossible, and a perfect in-and-out mission resulting in zero eyes on your agents makes you feel like a master of tactical espionage (turn-based) action. But those moments are so very rare and, sadly, not because the game is specifically difficult – more because it often falls into the trap of being outright unfair. Your people aren't superhuman: they can only see so far; they can only sneak so well – and there are elements built in to the UI to make sure the player knows what's going on, or what will happen, generally speaking. And yet, say that previous sentence again with a straight face after a completely unseen enemy or civilian blunders in out of the fog of war and instigates combat once again. Say it again when said combat results in five, six, seven faceless henchmen running in out of who knows where to blast your agents into oblivion in mere seconds. There's a fine line between welcome difficulty and genuine unfairness, and *Phantom Doctrine* trips over it more than a few times.

And this is compounded by elements that just feel shonky – there's a lack of information presented to the player throughout, with things like body modifications offering an absolutely unknown boost to your team member until it's actually been bought, paid for, and carried out. There's shonkiness when, say, you can't see where an enemy or civilian is looking even though you have line of sight on them, then suddenly, for no reason, you can. There's more shonkiness when you're told by moving your agent to one area there'll be an alarm, but moving them to the square next to it there won't be one, so you do, and there's an alarm. The middling graphics and some genuinely awful voice acting – at times – are just the superficial cherries on top, and it all leaves you feeling a bit put out.

Phantom Doctrine threatens to be a great game at times, and there's every chance it could be patched within an inch of its life to make something brilliant. But here, at release, what we have is a case of some great ideas mishandled – a conspiracy working against itself.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

OMNISCIENCE: We're beating the drum on this one, but a game encouraging so much stealth should not feature enemies who – once one sees you – all know where you are at all times.

VERDICT 6/10
GRITTY AND IMAGINATIVE, LET DOWN BY FUNDAMENTAL FLAWS



A BOUNCE BACK SEASON

NBA 2K19

Finally, we have a sports game that puts equal emphasis on play, both with and without the ball. Where *NBA 2K18* allowed you to take unfair advantage of certain attacking moves and shot types, *NBA 2K19* blesses improved intelligence on its defenders and forces you to think more strategically about how you beat them. The result is a major gameplay and realism improvement, plus a return to form for a series that some feared had lost its way.

Perhaps most impressive of all is how Visual Concepts has managed to balance its defence without limiting your attacking opportunities, meaning that scorelines remain as high as before and offensive aspirations aren't wholly replaced by defensive ones.

You do, though, need to embrace a new way of thinking about your attack – one that embraces the abilities of the players on the court and seeks to uncover clever new ways of combining them. This does, unquestionably, result in a higher barrier to entry than ever before and you will struggle enormously if you're not already familiar with the common tactical approaches utilised throughout the NBA.

Once you've got your head around just how important it is to see this as a team game, however, the joy of scoring victories through cooperation over relying on exploits makes for an experience that ranks as high as any in terms of providing a sense of accomplishment.

The core gameplay is joined by The Way Back, *2K19*'s narrative offering. It's one that's worth investing time into. In a story that reflects the series' own recent struggle for adoration, your created wannabe superstar begins his career in China after being overlooked in the NBA Draft.

Playing matches with Mandarin-speaking teammates, and in front of the eyes of Mandarin-speaking commentators and fans, you need to prove that you're worthy of attention and deserve a spot at the sport's top table. What's here is very much a character-led piece of writing, with the focus on an individual who must learn that achieving his dream takes more than simply living off past successes and taking his position for granted.

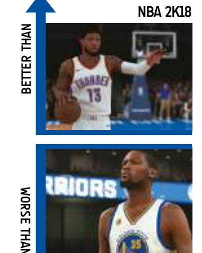
Unfortunately, despite its many qualities, microtransactions are a plague that are placed cynically front and centre. Improving your player is a grind of the highest order if you are not falling back on the VC currency that can speed up and streamline the process.

While this might be an increasingly typical, albeit highly unwelcome trend, the difference in progression speed here, depending on whether you use VC or not, is particularly stark and miserable.

Hopefully, next year's edition will see less reliance on VC as a means of being able to engage in a sensible pace of advancement and allow us to fully concentrate on what is, undoubtedly, an otherwise outstanding basketball game.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One, Switch
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: 2K Sports
DEVELOPER: Visual Concepts
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



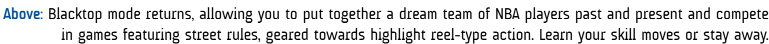
FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

ON FIRE: A new Takeover system sees players who are performing well receive a temporary stat boost that gives you every chance to dominate proceedings for a few plays.



VERDICT 8/10
STUNNING, BUT UNDERMINED BY MICROTRANSACTIONS




Above: Blacktop mode returns, allowing you to put together a dream team of NBA players past and present and compete in games featuring street rules, geared towards highlight reel-type action. Learn your skill moves or stay away.



BESET ON ALL SIDES

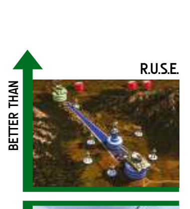
Bad North

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PC, Switch
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: Raw Fury
DEVELOPER: Plausible Concept
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

R.U.S.E.





TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER

WORSE THAN

***Bad North* pulls the remarkable trick of snatching ideas from many different genres and concocting them into something unique, rather than derivative, in the process.** As a real-time tactics rogue-like, it brings in classic elements from each of these genres, along with bite-sized fixes of action that feel purpose-built for mobile gaming, plus the kind of head-down, keep-going momentum that we would expect more from an endless runner. It does all this with a simple, effective art style to boot.

The sum total, however, while impressive, isn't flawless. The styling of the game is gorgeous and oddly brutal despite its simplicity, but that can also make discerning unit types and details in topography challenging in a split second. The difficulty level is tough as nails on Hard, which is the game's default setting. It's only a little less punishing on Normal. But on both of these points, it could be argued that it's all there to force improvisation. If you're someone who is quick to throw your gamepad across a room in frustration, this might be one to avoid. Even more so on a Switch, as we doubt that gorgeous screen could take the punishment.

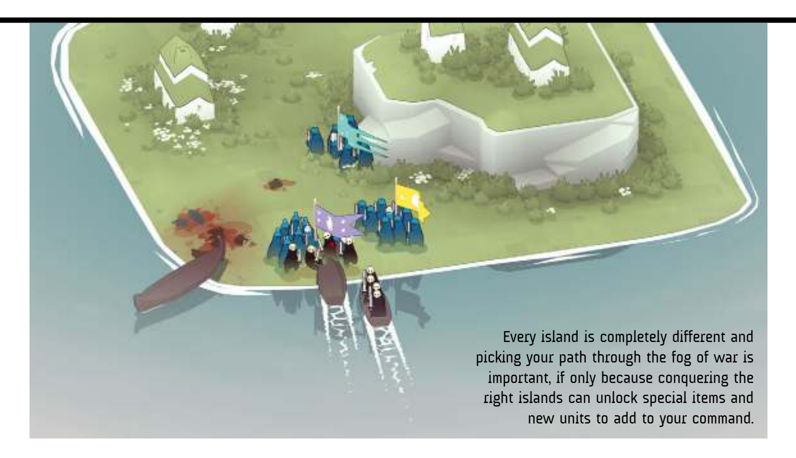
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

PAINT IT RED: For a game that is little more than stick figures bouncing into each other, *Bad North* manages to feel pretty visceral thanks to the way it liberally spreads blood all over the place.

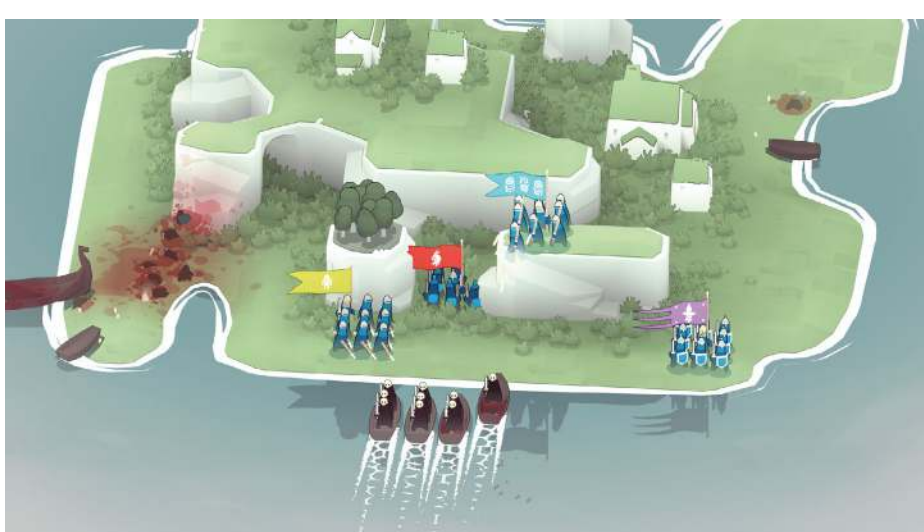
But it really is very compelling and keeps drawing us back in. When you do figure out what enemies are in play, the tactical rock, paper, scissors of which unit will be most effective in any scenario – not to mention from what position – keeps things interesting. As you progress through the islands, never able to turn back, tougher and tougher adversaries emerge to face you down on more complex and open islands with more villages to defend. We quickly realised that conquering every island was neither possible nor the point. It's about picking a path that gets you to the other side and collecting gold to pay for upgrades to your units, all while collecting special items and new commanders along the way. Keep enough of them alive and level them up and you just might be able to escalate your campaign to more islands per turn, but that's going to be very hard.

Having had our eye on this game for some time, we had worried that *Bad North* would end up being too simplistic or one dimensional, and while the later claim might still be made, the former cannot. It's such a well-balanced and inviting execution of the form that even when you lose all of your commanders for the fifth time and have to start again, you'll do so gladly. Its razor sharp focus and subtle mechanics combine to lift it above its base parts. *Bad North* is a deviously smart tactical challenge that plays nicely on home consoles, but may be even better on the move.



Every island is completely different and picking your path through the fog of war is important, if only because conquering the right islands can unlock special items and new units to add to your command.





Above: Arriving on an island, you will need to immediately assess how open it is to assault. Where are the tricky points to defend? Are there helpful choke points? Are there good vantage points for archers?



SMART, BRUTAL AND TO THE POINT

FROM ARSTOTZKA TO YOUR LOCAL BOOZER

Not Tonight

This might seem like a strange thing to say about a game that's set in a post-Brexit future, which constantly reminds you that it's about Brexit while you're playing it, but *Not Tonight* would be better if it wasn't about Brexit.

You play as a Brit who has had their citizenship revoked due to their European heritage and is being forced to work as a bouncer to earn enough cash to avoid being deported. Start working the doors and the debt this game owes to border control simulator *Papers, Please*, becomes immediately apparent. You begin by checking the IDs of punters to make sure they're old enough to get in. As you work your way across the bars and clubs of south-west England, fake IDs, bribes, tickets, guestlists and contraband are added to complicate your job and the decisions that you must make.

On this functional level, the game works brilliantly. It may be derivative of *Papers, Please*, but the tactile satisfaction of shifting around documents while searching for that balance of pushing through as many customers as possible without making mistakes that are going to get you sanctioned is compelling, if lacking some of the moral weight of its progenitor. A steady stream of new venues to work dovetails with the introduction of new systems to give the game a nice sense of progression. From rural pubs to high street clubs, these venues are incredibly well-observed and artfully drawn slices of British nightlife.

Where the game falls short is its attempt at satire. Despite explicitly telling the story of the rise of an extreme right-wing party and drawing on the experiences of refugees and immigrants, characters will spit venom at Irish and French "Euros", but seemingly have no problem with you letting in people of colour, or with names that would obviously be threatening to a racist.

In the context of the recent Windrush scandal, growing Islamophobia and hostility to refugees, this is jarring and dishonest. This is what we mean when we say the game would be better if it wasn't about Brexit. Its insistence on viewing it as *the* political event-horizon through which everything must be filtered ends up obscuring and distorting many of the issues that it is trying to deal with.

Misjudgments like these give you the sense that the game isn't saying, "Look at what the gig economy is like for those in poverty." Or, "Look at how refugees are tortured through enforced transience and bureaucratic measures." But instead, "Imagine if Brexit meant this stuff happened to normal people like us!" We doubt that's what is being aimed for, but it is the effect, nonetheless.

Despite these problems, we still like the game. The meditative and tactile act of sifting through docs at speed while enjoying the aesthetic pleasure of the music intermittently leaking through the doors in the background is worth it, irrespective of some thematic failings.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: No More Robots
DEVELOPER: PanicBarn
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: OS: Windows 8 or later, Processor: Intel Core i5, Graphics: Nvidia Geforce GTX 550/equivalent, Storage: 3GB available space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: THE WESTPORT INDEPENDENT



WORSE THAN: PAPERS, PLEASE

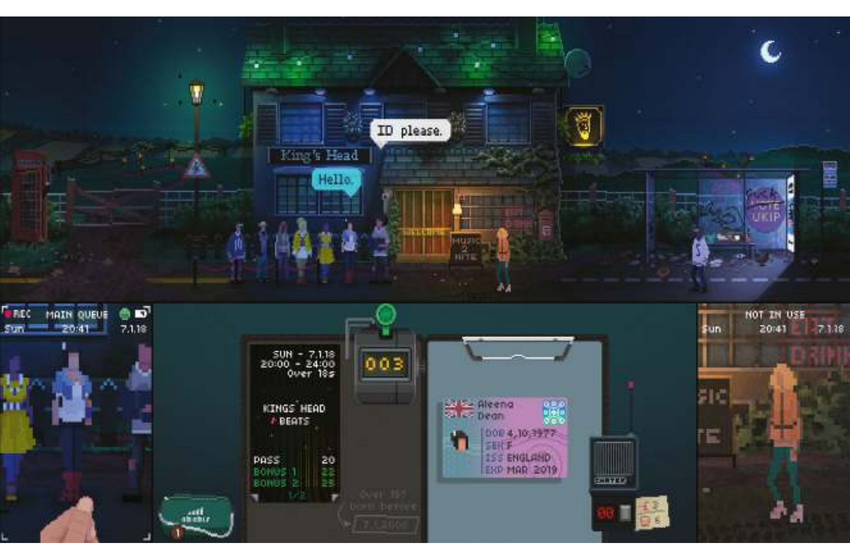
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

FULL CAPACITY: The game should be shorter. There are a few puzzles and story beats you'll likely miss the first time around, but the game's length puts you off wanting to go back and fill in the blanks.

VERDICT 7/10
A FLAWED BUT ENJOYABLE REWORK OF *PAPERS, PLEASE*





Above: There are cash bonuses for good performances, but trying to rush as many customers into a venue as possible can easily lead to mistakes that will get your wages docked, or even result in an early closure.





"It had a level of immersion that is, to my mind, still almost unmatched"

PATRICK MILLS, QUEST DESIGNER, CD PROJEKT RED



WHY I ♥...

ULTIMA VII: THE BLACK GATE

PATRICK MILLS,
QUEST DESIGNER, CD PROJEKT RED

“*Man, we are getting in the Wayback Machine for this one. A game I absolutely love is* Ultima VII. *It was, in many ways, the first open-world game. You can go out and go absolutely anywhere and, if you know where you are going, you can beat the game in about 15 minutes. It also had a level of immersion that is, to my mind, still almost unmatched. I very rarely see many games that have that level of interactivity with the world and you can see a lot of its influence through* The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt *and you are going to see it again in* Cyberpunk 2077. *I know that for sure because, were you to ask one of our game directors,* Ultima VII *would be his answer too!*”

RETRO

NO.205

THE RETRO GUIDE TO

RETRO INTERVIEW:



GAME-CHANGERS

We take a closer look at this often overlooked platformer that bridged the 2D and 3D platforming divide with the game's programmer, Kris Adcock

DISCUSS | Have your say on all things retro and much more on our dedicated forum forum.gamestm.co.uk



THE RETRO GUIDE TO… ELITE SYSTEMS

With over three decades in the industry Elite has made an impressive number of games. Here's the hits and misses that shaped the classic publisher

IT SEEMED LIKE everyone wanted to get into videogames during the early Eighties, and Richard Wilcox was no different. After publishing *Blue Thunder* under the less-than-snappy moniker of Richard Wilcox Software he rebranded the company, teamed up with his brother Steve (who handled sales and marketing) and gave his company a far cooler name – Elite Systems.

While it initially focused on original titles like *Kokotoni Wilf* and *Roller Coaster*, the brothers soon realised the power of arcade and movie and TV licences and changed their strategy accordingly. The end result was that Elite did extremely well throughout the Eighties and Nineties, only coming undone slightly – as many companies from the time did – with the introduction of 3D gaming and the shift to consoles. In fact it still exists today, largely operating in the mobile market – although it did work on a bluetooth version of the ZX Spectrum a few years back – which is an impressive achievement when you consider how fickle the games industry now is. Here we're focusing on the titles that defined the company in its earlier days. How many did you play?





KOKOTONI WILF

1984

Elite's debut game may share an obvious similarity to Matthew Smith's *Jet Set Willy*, but there's still much about it that makes it stand apart from its illustrious peer. The biggest difference is Wilf's ability to fly, which greatly changes how you approach each screen. There are still plenty of tight platforms to navigate and squeeze past, but it gives you an even greater sense of freedom than Smith's game as you're not simply limited to where you can walk.

Kokotoni Wilf's story (what there is) is arguably stronger too, with Wilf having to collect the scattered pieces of an amulet so he can gain access to the six time zones that make up the game's levels. Said stages are the final treat to Elite's game as they ensure that there are plenty of different areas to navigate compared to Miner Willy's (admittedly huge) mansion.

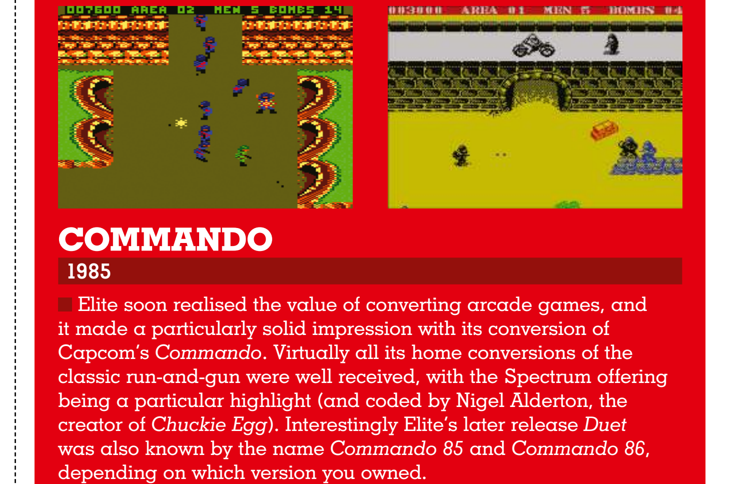




AIRWOLF

1984

There's a lot to like about Elite's adaptation of the popular TV show. The concept is sound, with Stringfellow Hawke (classically Eighties name) navigating his eponymous attack chopper through a deep underground base in search of five missing scientists. The chopper is challenging, but not impossible, to master and the level design is solid, requiring you to shoot out switches so you can travel deeper into the complex. It's a pity that the infamous regenerating walls that you need to shoot down to progress are just as frustrating to take out now as they were in 1984.



COMMANDO

1985

Elite soon realised the value of converting arcade games, and it made a particularly solid impression with its conversion of Capcom's *Commando*. Virtually all its home conversions of the classic run-and-gun were well received, with the Spectrum offering being a particular highlight (and coded by Nigel Alderton, the creator of *Chuckie Egg*). Interestingly Elite's later release *Duet* was also known by the name *Commando 85* and *Commando 86*, depending on which version you owned.

FRANK BRUNO'S BOXING

1985

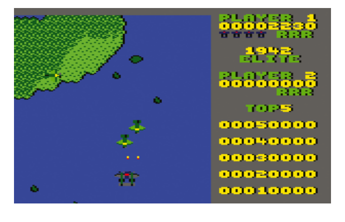
This entertaining fighting game is a shameless clone of Nintendo's 1984 arcade game, *Super Punch Out!!*, going so far as to feature three identical looking fighters. Interestingly it was released around the same time as *Rocco* by Gremlin Graphics, but while Gremlin's game has superior visuals, Elite's offering packs a punch where it counts – in the fighting mechanics department. It's highly satisfying to systematically take down each opponent, while the difficulty factor is challenging but never overwhelming.



1942

1986

After the success of *Commando*, Elite worked on another Capcom arcade release, this time based on the company's popular vertical shooter. It's another fine effort which isn't anywhere near as fast as the arcade original, but does feature all the key elements, including the victory roll to escape danger, the waves of planes that drop power-ups and the landing ships. The Amstrad and Spectrum versions are particularly good as they keep the scoring on the right side of the screen to preserve the original game's aspect ratio.









ROLLER COASTER

1985

■ This excellent platformer was another great original effort from Elite and proved the publisher had a good eye for interesting games. Set in a gigantic theme park, the idea is to collect the large number of moneybags that are scattered around the deviously designed screens, using the numerous rides and many rollercoasters as you go. It would be repurposed by Elite many years later for the Game Boy, as you'll discover further on.

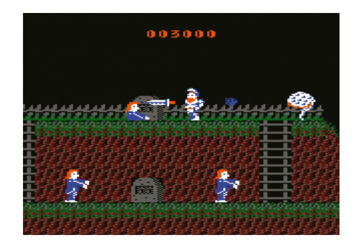
1986 WAS A FANTASTIC YEAR FOR ELITE WITH A STRING OF SOLID ARCADE CONVERSIONS



PAPERBOY

1986

■ 1986 was a fantastic year for Elite with a string of solid arcade conversions. One of its most popular was for *Paperboy*, Atari's excellent delivery-'em-up that was often featured on the TV show *First Class*. The Elite conversion is very good, particularly on the Amstrad where the chunky bright visuals effortlessly match the bright visuals of the arcade original. Sadly, out of the numerous 8-bit micro versions that Elite produced, only the C64 offering features in-game music.





GHOSTS 'N GOBLINS

1986

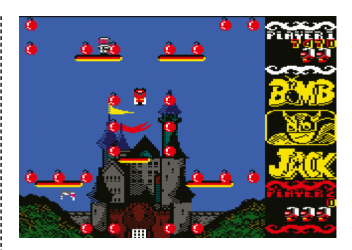
■ Capcom's ghoulish platformer proved to be a good choice for Elite, with its developers doing a good job of capturing the difficulty and atmosphere of the arcade original. The Amstrad version is probably the weakest (although it has a lovely loading screen from Ste Pickford) while the C64 (with more loading art from Ste) is easily the best and has a stunningly funky soundtrack by Mark Cooksey.

SPACE HARRIER

1986

■ Elite's coders were never going to match the sheer speed and intense action of Yu Suzuki's original arcade blaster, but they certainly tried. While the 16-bit offerings are actually surprisingly faithful ports, the 8-bit offerings are less impressive, featuring dull visuals that fail to capture the excitement of Sega's game.





BOMB JACK

1986

■ Ask any Spectrum owner what Elite's best arcade conversion was and they'll most likely say this one. It's a truly fantastic adaptation of Tehkan's coin-op, which requires you to fly around the screen and ideally defuse bombs in a specific order. The Amstrad one is also decent, but the ST and Amiga ones are very disappointing, particularly as they came out a good five years after the arcade original.





SCOOBY-DOO

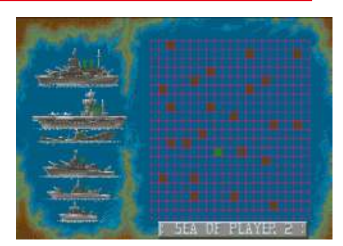
1986

■ When Elite first revealed *Scooby-Doo* in magazines it promised to be an epic-looking game with stunning *Dragon's Lair*-styled visuals. The game was simply too ambitious, however, and the humble Spectrum didn't have the memory required to store the huge number of animations that would be needed to power such a graphics-hungry game.

After the project fell apart Elite contracted Gargoyle Games, who delivered a fun, but rather conventional platformer that saw Scooby running around a haunted castle in search of his missing friends. It still looks great, with lovely visuals and expressive animation, but we'll always wonder about what could have been.

WHEN ELITE FIRST REVEALED SCOOBY-DOO IN MAGAZINES IT PROMISED TO BE AN EPIC-LOOKING GAME WITH STUNNING VISUALS





BATTLESHIPS

1987

■ A computer port of the classic board game sounds dreadfully boring, but Elite did a surprisingly decent job at making it far from dull to play. The main excitement comes from watching a great sequence of your ship firing off shots and exploding others whenever you score a direct hit.

THUNDERCATS

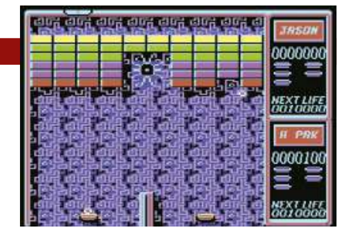
1987



■ Critically acclaimed upon release, *ThunderCats* proves to be a surprisingly average run-and-gun in the vein of *Ghosts 'N Goblins* and other similar arcade games. Lion-O must fend off attacks from an endless supply of enemies, many of which don't actually appear in the TV show. There are also opportunities for the ThunderCats leader to hop into a flying vehicle and shoot down foes or grab a handy gun, which suddenly makes the onslaught a lot more manageable. By far the most interesting aspect of the game is that it's simply a retooled version of *Samurai Dawn*, as revealed by YouTube veteran Larry Bundy Jr in 2014.

BATTY

1987



■ Amazingly, one of the Spectrum's best games (at least from our point of view) was actually given away for free as a cover tape by *Your Sinclair*.

At its core *Batty* is really nothing more than an *Arkanoid* clone, which itself is just a jazzed up version of *Breakout*. It's a far superior game that greatly improves on the similar titles available at the time thanks to cleverly designed stages, a great range of power-ups and – most importantly – a cooperative two-player mode that features two players controlling half of the screen each in an attempt to clear the various wall configurations.

LIVE AND LET DIE

1988

■ Released 15 years after the debut of the original film, *Live And Let Die* is a technically impressive game that has you careering around the world's waterways in a tooled-up speedboat. It looks nice, but is let down by its dull level design and weak enemy AI. US readers will recognise it as *Aquablast*.





IKARI WARRIORS

1988

■ Elite did another fine job converting SNK's frantic run-and-gun, and even managed to get around the rotary control system the original arcade game used. Interestingly the 8-bit versions are more fun to play than the later 16-bit offerings, although they obviously take a graphical hit. There are two versions of the game on C64, with the US release by Data East USA being absolutely dreadful.

OVERLANDER

1988



■ The cover of *Overlander* suggests an exciting apocalyptic racing game in the style of *Mad Max 2* or *Roadblasters*. Sadly it's a fairly conventional offering with solid enough visuals but very little in the way of excitement. The C64 version is at least saved by a rather pleasing soundtrack by Mark Cooksey, while the Amstrad version is a weak Spectrum port.

MUCH SCOOBY-DOO ABOUT NOTHING

Richard Wilcox on the missing Scooby-Doo game

How did Scooby-Doo come about?

God, I loved the Scooby cartoons. I still do; they're probably my favourite of all time. Not quite sure who had the idea of licensing Scooby. It's highly likely that I would have suggested it, but Steve would have done the deal. He was very good at tracking down who owned the rights and getting the licences, even though the TV and film companies weren't attuned to merchandising and rights exploitation like they are today.

Tell us about the original idea.

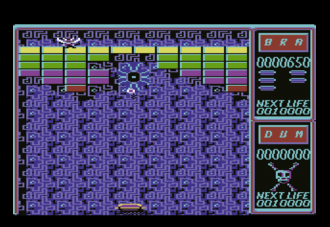
When it came to what the Scooby game would be the design really fell to me. I was never a great programmer and only a very mediocre designer of graphics, but I wasn't a bad games designer. I was methodical and structured even back in those days when the idea of creating a game design document before starting coding was alien. The ambitions for Scooby were enormous. Even though it would sell because of the licence, I wanted it to be a great game in its own right. The prototype was Don Bluth's *Dragon's Lair*, something that looked as good as any cartoon but was interactive. To me, it seemed that if we could at least distil some of the elements of that then we might have a chance of telling a real Scooby story and make something that felt at least a little bit like an episode of the show.

Why didn't it happen?

The big difference between that game and ours would be the hardware. Theirs was pulling the animation off LaserDisc. We just had 48K of RAM in which to cram all of our animations. In our defence, we gave it a pretty good shot. I came up with what these days you might call a 'game engine' that allowed us to define and run interactive scenes. It was pretty darn powerful and allowed you to create mini-games that were extremely varied. The really clever thing was that you didn't need to code each mini-game separately; we had developed a scene designer tool that allowed you to do the layout and define the interactivity. This tool then encoded the levels in such a way that they could be played back in real time. Andy Williams did the coding. He was Elite's number-one programmer and, of course, he nailed it. But what killed us was the graphics. I hadn't accounted for just how much animation we would need and how long it would take and ultimately how much memory it would need… memory that, of course, the Spectrum didn't have.

Could it ever have been made?

It was ahead of its time. A few years down the line when art teams were much bigger and machines had more memory we would have got there. I still don't think there's been a game that has combined the best elements of cartoons and games.





GOING BATTY

Jason Benham on his popular Arkanoid clone

What's the history behind *Batty*?
The history is that I independently made an *Arkanoid* clone for the Commodore 64. Living in a small seaside town – Redcar – I had access to all the latest games in the arcades, and I could get right through to the end of *Arkanoid* with maybe a couple of continues. I wanted to make a game that could do everything *Arkanoid* could do and more, hence the enemies firing shots that stun you, the extra power-ups, the bricks you can only destroy from the top, metal walls and so on. From what I remember, *Batty* took around three or four months to create while working at home.

How did you go about getting the game published?
I originally submitted the game to Superior Software in Leeds, who had published my previous C64 game *The Legend Of Sinbad*, but the guys there felt it was too close to the upcoming licensed versions of *Arkanoid* for comfort and passed on it. I then discovered that Elite Systems was looking to put out an *Arkanoid* clone on multiple platforms. Elite scooped it up and I was paid a lump sum, maybe £4,000 or so, from what I remember. Despite making games on the VIC-20 and C64 since 1982, it was the first game where I actually got paid a decent amount!

Did Elite ask you to make any design changes to the game?
Elite requested a few small changes. I was asked to improve the graphics for the bat and change the intro music a little as I had completely copied it from *Arkanoid*! The magnetic field that would deflect the ball was also requested later on. Aside from that, everything else was in my original submission. The extra power-ups, aliens firing and multiplayer mode were ported to the other platforms based on the C64 version.

Did you have anything to do with the Spectrum and Amstrad versions?
I never dealt directly with the guys making versions for other platforms, so there wasn't really any parallel development except when adding features at the end. The magnet-in-the-playfield idea was taken from either the Amstrad or Speccy version. It's the main feature over which I had little design input.

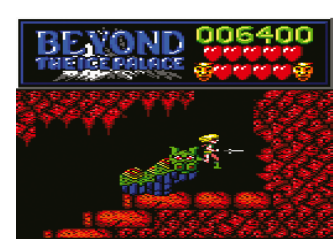
Were you happy with how the game turned out?
The feature I'm most proud of is the two-player mode. I know other games from that era did something similar – *TRAZ* maybe – but it added a lot to the frenetic gameplay. I was upset that it was never released as a standalone product. I think it only came out on the Hit-Pak collection.

It was released on Elite's budget label as well. How do you think *Batty* held up to home versions of *Arkanoid*?
I was very pleased with the game, especially compared to the original *Arkanoid*. The sequel, *Revenge Of Doh*, had a few cool power-ups that mine didn't have, but the two-player mode in *Batty* really made the difference. If you got two players together who liked the game, you could just play for hours and lose track of time.

BEYOND THE ICE PALACE

1988

Beyond The Ice Palace started life as one of Elite's ThunderCats games, but the company eventually changed its mind and Nick Jones (who revealed the information to website Games That Weren't C64) continued to code his adventure. The end result is a fun hack-and-slash with enjoyable platforming that should please fans of *Ghosts 'N Goblins*.

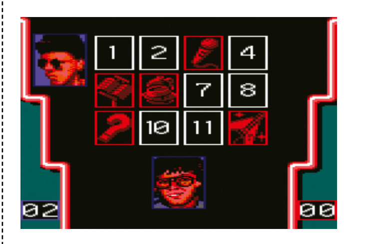




BUGGY BOY

1988

While none of the home systems could replicate the three-screen setup of the arcade original, the Amiga version featured here and the earlier 8-bit offerings (which arrived a year earlier) are all worth investigating. Handling is tight and responsive, the tracks offer plenty of challenge and it does a great job of capturing the bright aesthetics of Tatsumi's 1985 original.



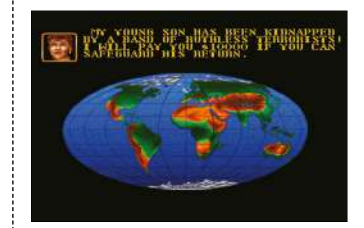


MIKE READ'S POP QUIZ

1989

Elite was never one to miss a good licence deal, and securing Mike Read's popular TV quiz was a clever call. The final game is a surprisingly authentic experience with a large range of questions. The digitised images obviously look best on the Amiga, but all the home systems are pretty good. If you're not a child of the Eighties you might want to give it a miss, mind.

ELITE WAS NEVER ONE TO MISS A GOOD LICENCE DEAL, AND SECURING MIKE READ'S POPULAR TV QUIZ WAS A CLEVER CALL





DOGS OF WAR

1989

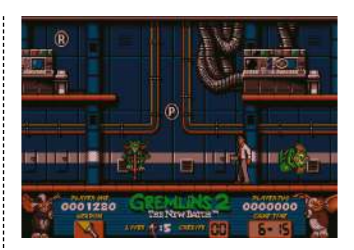
Essentially an enhanced version of *Commando*, *Dogs Of War* mixes things up by giving you a variety of missions to achieve and adds in far more varied locations to explore. While it's low on variety, the sheer amount of carnage on-screen does keep things entertaining, while the range of changing missions ensures there's a little more strategy than simply running up the screen shooting things.

MIGHTY BOMB JACK

1990

■ Elite's third Bomb Jack game (it also created a home computer sequel in 1986) is actually a port of *Bomb Jack*'s sequel, which was originally released for the NES in 1986. It's an interesting take on the earlier bomb collecting of the original, with additional focus on coins, which give Jack several abilities when collected. It lacks the accessibility and tightness of the original, but is still fun to play.

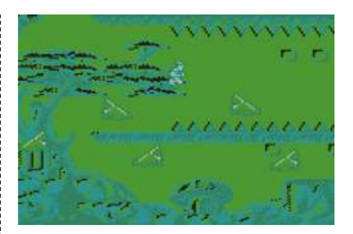


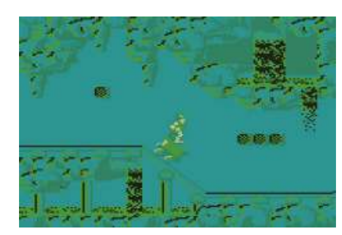


GREMLINS 2: THE NEW BATCH

1990

■ One of the last movie licences Elite was involved with was this disappointing Motivetime effort. It looks nice enough with some smart-looking environments and nicely animated gremlins, but the game itself is extremely tedious to play and far too difficult. It was well received on the Amiga, but we fail to see how.





DRAGON'S LAIR: THE LEGEND

1991

■ Realising that it would never be able to recreate Don Bluth's stunning animation for its Game Boy licence, Elite looked instead to its back catalogue and found the perfect solution – *Roller Coaster*. The classic Spectrum game was simply retooled with brand-new gothic backgrounds and enemies to suit the new game, and the player now controlled Dirk Daring. It works extremely well, and while the playing area is a lot smaller than before it doesn't harm how it plays.

WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP SOCCER

1990

■ Elite ported Sega's popular Mega Drive football game to home systems the year after its release, but it probably wasn't really worth the effort. While it features a similar top-down view to games like *Microprose Soccer* and *Sensible Soccer*, it's nowhere near as much fun to play and the computer AI isn't particularly challenging. Not terrible, but there are better options out there.





DR FRANKEN

1992

■ After a few conversions of Sega games, Elite committed to Nintendo for the 16-bit period; this was one of the company's more interesting efforts. It's a fun little platformer where you have to search for the missing body parts of your girlfriend. A sequel followed in 1997.





JOE & MAC: CAVEMAN NINJA

1993

■ Elite's port of the classic Data East platformer is a little disappointing if we're honest. While it retains the two-player mode of the arcade original, it's let down by missing animation and a low frame-rate. The dinos look nice and it's still fun to play, but the Amiga is capable of a lot more.



TOURNAMENT GOLF

1990

■ This is basically another Sega conversion, this time of *Arnold Palmer Tournament Golf*. It's a perfectly serviceable adaptation of the popular sports game with some challenging courses and plenty of game modes to master. While Palmer's name is nowhere to be seen in the actual game, a loading screen still survives of him, but now he has brown hair.

STRIKER

1993



■ Elite published the SNES version of Rage Software's football game, and it's still surprisingly good fun to play. It's very arcade-like in its approach, featuring a similar pace as *Sensible Soccer* and ridiculously good goalkeepers. There are plenty of different game modes to ensure interest doesn't flag, as well as an indoor soccer option, which was quite unusual for the time.





DIRT RACER

1995

■ One of the last games Elite created for the Super Nintendo was this ambitious off-road racing game that was powered by the machine's Super FX chip. It's similar in style to *Stunt Race FX*, but lacks that game's charm and well-designed courses. It was an exclusive to Europe.

Disney's Tarzan

BEHIND THE SCENES

This 20-year-old game let you strap on your loincloth and play as Edgar Rice Burrough's ape-man in an often overlooked Disney platformer



Released: 1999
Format: PlayStation, Nintendo 64, PC, Game Boy Color
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment, Disney Interactive, Activision
Key Staff: Jon Williams (production), Julian Walshaw-Vaugham (programmer), Kris Adcock (programmer), Mark Povey (animator), Matt Dixon (graphics), Steve Duckworth (sound)

WHEN *DISNEY'S TARZAN* SWUNG ON TO THE PLAYSTATION BACK IN 1999, IT DID SO ON THE BACK OF ANOTHER FRANCHISED GAME FROM THE HOUSE OF MICKEY MOUSE. Developer Eurocom had worked on *Disney's Hercules* in time for a 1997 release, and its largely positive reaction saw the studio awarded another potentially lucrative title, to coincide with the planned animated comedy-drama, *Tarzan*, which ended up grossing $448 million by the end of its box office run.

Eurocom's game – published by Sony Computer Entertainment – was, from the outset, intended to be as faithful to the movie as possible. "It was important to Disney that games looked like they came from Disney," says programmer Kris Adcock. By 1997, Eurocom had fostered a good relationship with the entertainment giant ("We made nice-looking games," Adcock attests). But rather than simply make a 2D platformer, the developer sought to replicate the success that previous Disney titles had enjoyed by creating a game that was, to all intents and purposes, 3D.

It was, after all, produced in an era when 3D had firmly established itself as the way to go, the PlayStation having been released some three years before work got underway on *Tarzan*. A 2D look – that had worked so well for previous acclaimed Disney games, such as Shiny's *Aladdin* and Westwood Studio's *The Lion King*, on the 16-bits – would simply not have appealed. Even so, making *Tarzan* 3D was still a risk, not to mention a challenge. It was the first time Eurocom had taken a 2D character and converted it to 3D for the purposes of gameplay.

"*Hercules* was predominantly a 2D game, but running on 3D hardware," Adcock explains. "I think the team were keen to push this further with *Tarzan*. Being able to play 3D games on consumer-grade hardware was still comparatively new at that time. Other studios were dying because they weren't able to make the transition from 2D sprites to 3D geometry, and all the new maths and concepts that goes with it."

"EVEN WITH THE LATEST HARDWARE WE GET THESE DAYS, WE KNOW THAT 2D PLATFORMERS ARE STILL FUN"



The battles against the sabor are intense, with Tarzan looking to inflict as much damage as possible while avoiding being hurt.



One of the most fun sections is Stampede that has you running away from elephants from screen-out perspective, adding great variety to the game.

The approach was to produce 3D models and environments, but have the action take place on a two-dimensional plane, and the work was carried out at Eurocom's offices in Derby, England, where games such as *James Bond Jr*, *Lethal Weapon*, *Disney's The Jungle Book* and *Spot Goes To Hollywood* had been created. The studio dated back to 1988 and initially made games for Nintendo. It moved into Mega Drive production in 1994 and then to the PC a year later. It was keen to widen its scope and make its mark.

Derby, incidentally, is also where Core Design was based, another company founded in 1988, this time by former Gremlin Graphics employees. Core had achieved huge success with *Tomb Raider* and made Lara Croft an undoubted star of gaming and an icon for the PlayStation. Notably, it had mastered 3D, and so there was perhaps more than a little rivalry between the two local studios. Thankfully, it would appear that Eurocom was as passionate about its projects as those based down the road.

"Those who worked at Eurocom were creative, off-the-wall nut-jobs and I loved them," Adcock says. "There were enviably talented artists, many of whom are now writers or illustrators of children's book and album covers. And we had animators who had worked on children's cartoons that I grew up watching. There were programmers of games that I had grown up playing and everyone's doors were open. You could always hear idiot conversations, bad singing and cheerful swearing."

The wing in which *Tarzan* was made was a series of small offices, connected by a central corridor. It may have felt claustrophobic, but the team was working on a game that would take place in the great outdoors by way of setting it in a jungle full of trees, wild animals and open spaces. Planning of the game began in 1997 and they worked very closely with Walt Disney Feature Animation right from the start. It was important for a number of reasons, not least because of Disney's desire to ensure the game looked and felt right.

As such, the developers came into close contact with the film's producers and directors. They were handed assets from the movie to aid them in the planning and creation of their game, with the script ending up in Eurocom's hands very early in the process. A design document was produced, identifying key aspects of the movie that the game developers could draw upon. The intention was to identify scenes

CRY VICTORY

TARZAN'S AS GOOD A CELEBRITY AS ANY: CAN YOU GET HIM OUT OF HERE?

Get to the sixth level and you end up face-to-face with the fierce animal that is the sabor. Thrusting your spear forward, Tarzan hopes to inflict damage on his enemy as it roars and pounces, ready to take chunks out of our jungle hero, who requires a steady nerve and some nifty leaping out of the way. It's a nice departure from the full-on platforming that makes up most of the game.





The game switches from a young Tarzan to the grown-up version most people are familiar with. In this sense, it mimics the film and you can see exactly which version you're playing by looking in this corner, where you'll also find a bar that indicates how healthy Tarzan is at that particular moment. The number of lives left are in the opposite corner.



You will also come across letters that spell out TARZAN. As you collect each one, the letters will appear on screen. Once you have them all, you can access a movie.



There are also portions of a baboon sketch littered around the jungle. Collecting these and completing the picture takes you to a bonus level. Normal levels are completed by reaching Jane's parasol, which opens and calls up the Level Complete screen.

As well as proving great fun, collecting the tokens located around the jungle and trying to ensure that you have the lot will earn you a great reward: an extra life for every 100 you manage to collect.





As well as playing as Tarzan young and older, gamers can also enjoy taking control of Jane, in this case as she darts away from chasing baboons.

that would make for a thrilling ride. "We knew the story arc, and could look at key moments that would be good to create levels around," Adcock elaborates. "That reinforced the idea that the player was 'in' the film."

To help them, the Feature Animation team handed over 2D animation that was originally intended for the movie. It allowed Eurocom a base upon which to formulate its 3D interpretations. "Disney was concerned all the way through that it must look and feel like a Disney product," Adcock says. "They knew that kids would watch the film, then want to buy the game and feel like they were living the film again. So they were concerned about art style, the chosen colours and the animation style. It was also important that the gameplay elements weren't contrary to the characters. We couldn't have Tarzan using a gun, for example."

Indeed, Disney was so hands-on that it even had an official palette for each film, which the developers had to adhere to. "Thankfully, the senior animator on the project, Mark Povey, had a long experience of producing animations in film, TV and games, so he judged it all really well," Adcock says.

The developers were assisted by animators and art directors from the movie. The lead animator of the film Glen Keane, produced the walk and run cycle that showed the games team how the character should move and act. This was scanned and used directly, allowing for a fluidity of animation that worked really well as the main character made his way around the platforms and over the obstacles that were placed before him. Meanwhile, the film's art director, Daniel St Pierre, helped with the art direction of the game.

From this emerged a single-player romp across 14 varied levels that felt fresh throughout. For most of the game, the player assumed the role of Tarzan himself, both as a young boy and an adult man. But to spice things up, the designers also allowed players to control Jane, Tarzan's traditional love interest who had, incidentally, appeared in the first Tarzan novel, *Tarzan Of The Apes*, in 1912. She had been voiced beautifully by Minnie Driver in the animated movie of 1999 and did so again in the game.

It was also possible to play as the young gorilla Terkina, the cute tritagonist from the movie. "The film shows Tarzan as a boy, and some key moments in his life, then moves to him as an adult, so it made sense to echo this in the game, and use Young Tarzan within the introductory, tutorial levels," says Adcock. "I seem to recall that we also used younger animals for hazards in those levels."

Tarzan would leap from platform to platform in the lushly rendered jungle, swing from vines, slide along fallen trees and dispatch animals (and humans) by lobbing fruit at them. Objects could be forced open by emitting a cry and slamming the ground and there were secret areas, hidden items and tokens to collect. Bonus levels would open up by gathering four pieces of Jane's baboon drawing, which could be found around the playing area, while locating the six letters that spelt out Tarzan would unlock scenes from the movie. There were extra lives to be had and an energy bar to keep an eye on. The latter was bolstered by munching down bananas. Given they're packed with antioxidants, fibre and vitamin C, this seemed rather apt.

Although there were no guns, Tarzan could make use of a knife, which was handy for close-up combat,



There are many vines for Tarzan to take hold of and swing through the scenery with many well-positioned for collectible items.

and there was also access to a parasol and spear. The spear was put to great use in level six, Sabor Attacks, when you had to fend off fierce lionesses in a series of boss encounters (sabor being the generic name for the animals in the fictional language of Mangani used in the Tarzan novels). Such moments felt special and broke the game up well. "It was aimed at junior school age kids – so it was about making it fun," Adcock says.

He also contends that drawing upon the 2D elements of platformers was a good move. "Thing is, 2D platformers work. They just do," he says. "Even with the latest hardware we get these days, we know that 2D platformers are still fun. (I'm still hammering Rayman on my Vita.) And we didn't want to make something that was so wildly off-the-chain in terms of game ideas that Disney wouldn't go for it, or that customers wouldn't be comfortable with it. So: a 2D platformer, but in a 3D world, where the platforms were bendy branches. It worked OK. The 'tree surfing' scenes in *Tarzan* made it perfectly in-keeping, too."

In many respects, the game was a mix of Sonic and Mario, but Adcock is reluctant to say that *Tarzan* pushed the platform genre in any way. "It would sound a bit pretentious and I don't think anyone had delusions of that," he says. "You can never know whether you've

"THE DISNEY EXEC WASN'T ALLOWED TO LEAVE US ALONE WITH THE TAPE IN CASE WE TRIED TO COPY IT"

evolved things at all until enough time has passed so you can view it with some perspective. It's been 20 years, and I still don't have an answer." In truth, it wasn't particularly ground-breaking, but the mixed-in elements made it a blast.

Good examples are the stampede levels in which players would control Tarzan, young and old, plus Jane, as they ran towards the camera pursued by wild baboons or herds of impressively drawn elephants. There were obvious parallels with Crash Bandicoot, hammered home by sequences in which Tarzan would go the other way – into the screen, leaping over great big holes in the ground. But they fitted perfectly: having Jane pursued by baboons, for instance, was a direct movie reference and brought added excitement, particularly for those who had enjoyed the film.

"I don't think the tech was too complicated, but quite a lot of work went into the pickup placement, to make it fun," Adcock says. "I know there was a bit of work done to draw all those elephants and keep the frame rate. I seem to recall only the front few are 3D models, and the rest are animated sprites."

Such thinking would have pleased Disney, which, as we've seen, was adamant the game fitted like a

WHAT THEY SAID...

While Tarzans of old would have very little trouble carving a swathe of destruction through the African jungle, I'm not sure it fits in with the new, kinder, gentler Tarzan. Perhaps some anger management classes are in order

GameFan, 1999







The environments, characters and effects are all stunning, making full use of PlayStation's pixel-pushing might. Load times are long but the levels themselves are quite large and beautiful

NextGen, 1999

glove with the movie. That said, Bonnie Arnold, the film's producer, suggested gaming elements and revealed aspects of the film that wouldn't make the final cut or draw attention to fleeting material that could be used well (in the Bonus Stage 2, you could ride a stork – this was inspired by the growth of Tarzan from boy to man, also drawing upon the *Son Of Man* clip shown within the game). Tree surfing in the game was a Disney suggestion too. The ideas kept coming over the two years it took to make the game.

"Midway through development, Disney visited us with an in-progress VHS of the film and we watched it as a team," recalls Adcock. "Personally, I found it fascinating to see it half-finished, because it gave a really good insight about what processes were involved. For example: *Tarzan* was an early example of using computers to do 3D graphics – a lot of the jungle backgrounds were 3D-generated. Then classical hand-drawn animation was laid over the top. In the half-made video we saw, we saw the pre-rendered 3D graphics laid over the top of storyboard stills, or blue-pencilled rough sketches. It was cool to see! Seeing the film simply reinforced that we were on the right track, and helped us make one or two decisions about what to do for some gameplay elements."

For all of the openness, however, Disney remained keen to protect its franchise. "The Disney exec wasn't allowed to leave us alone with the tape, even for a moment, in case we tried to copy it. I think he took it to the loo with him at one point," Adcock shares. But the team was allowed to introduce each level with a short clip from the film ("This seemed sensible," Adcock says). Not that everything was plain sailing.

Eurocom had solid in-house development tools such as its own map editor that helped to make the creation of the game more straightforward than it could have been. But the data-generation process could be long for big maps, which meant the iteration time could be slow when placing enemies and pickups. "The memory card code was also horrid and memory constraints could be quite tight," says Adcock. "When you're working until 2am and viewing everything in a sleep-deprived haze, it can make you cry into your keyboard."

Adcock also remains unhappy with the AI, all of these years on. "It was my first time doing AI and honestly: some of it is rather bad. If I could go back in time, I'd do that better," he says. The problem, he recalls, was that it was very simple even though he thought the implementation of it was "so hard at the time". He benefits from 20 years of working on more difficult hardware and engines and says the idea of writing another game for the orignal PlayStation sounds like a blast. But it gives an indication of how different some games could have been if only for experience at the time.

Difficulties extended to those working on the graphics. "The animators for the film only had to be concerned about making the animations look right from a single camera angle, but when our animators had to work, they needed to build animations that would work on 3D models, and so look right from any angle,"

> A GAMING EVOLUTION

Sonic The Hedgehog > Disney's Tarzan > Crash Bandicoot: The Wrath of Cortex

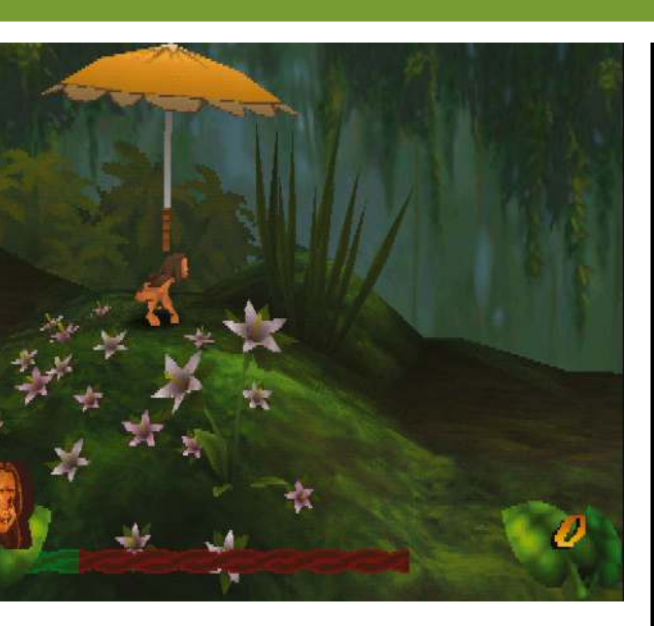


There are elements of Sonic The Hedgehog within *Tarzan*, most notably the collection of items and the predominantly side-scrolling 2D-style gameplay



Eurocom produced the port of the Gamecube version and it was well placed given that some stages of *Tarzan* drew upon past Crash Bandicoot games.





Adcock explains. "It was then that we realised that many of Tarzan's animations in the film would be simply impossible in real life – legs and arms would constantly tangle, and backbones would bend in impossible ways. So our animators had a lot of work making animations that were possible in 3D, but echoed the 'vibe' of the original Disney work."

It was Adcock's job, however, to create the builds for the QA team as well as the builds for submission to Sony. "I also had to produce the localisation builds and their submissions, checking that every disk booted and loaded the correct language data, and played videos that had been dubbed correctly. I was so sick of the PlayStation boot sound, the Disney video, the Eurocom development video, the intro music, and the introduction video to the first level. It's been 20 years, and I can still recite, 'I sure scared you, mom! You sure did! Can't you imitate any quieter animals?', in about six different languages."

Even so, the voice work was superb. Disney Character Voices, a division within Disney, was able to make use of Tony Goldwyn for Tarzan, just like in the movie, along with Minnie Driver as Jane. Alex D. Linz, who had appeared in *Home Alone 3*, voiced Young Tarzan once more, while the booming voice of Brian Blessed was used for Clayton, again mirroring the movie. Rosie O'Donnell, who voiced Terk in the movie, was unable to lend her voice in the game due to other filming commitments, however.

"The hours that we did on *Tarzan* were immense," Adcock says. "We all suffered from sleep deprivation, and we'd all seen each other at our worst; tempers at their shortest. For some reason, one morning (very close to submission), we'd all worked until about 2am, then gone home for a few hours to remind our wives what we looked like, and have a shower before returning to work. None of us were in our right minds and we had a prolonged conversation about how 'mad it would be if there was an island somewhere where all the men sound like Bruce Forsyth and all the women sound like Jimmy Savile'. But when you get through all that together, it does make you all stronger. I've made some of my strongest friendships in the games industry and I loved making this game."

SWINGING ON TO OTHER FORMATS

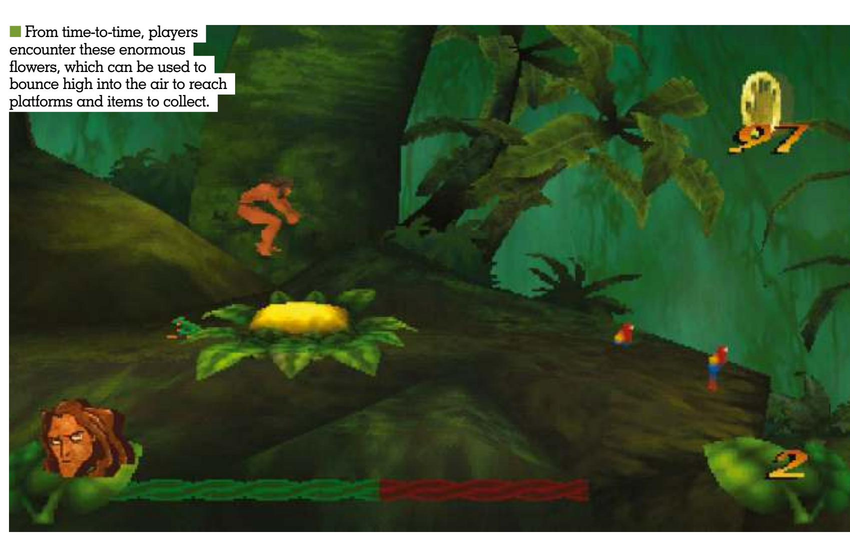
How Tarzan made his way on to the Nintendo 64 and Game Boy Color

Having created the PlayStation version of the game, Kris Adcock was one of a handful of staff to turn their attention to the Nintendo 64 conversion. "Everyone else was sick of the project and they had moved on to *Crash Bash*," he tells us.

The game was identical to the PlayStation version and it was released in 2000. But the development of the Game Boy Color variant was handed to Digital Eclipse. Once again, it starred Tarzan young and old, as well as Jane and Terk, although it had 23 stages and straightforward 2D graphics.

The idea was to find a certain number of bananas while avoiding enemy animals, Sabor and Clayton. It spawned a sequel, called *Disney's Tarzan: Return To The Jungle*, for the Game Boy Advance.





From time-to-time, players encounter these enormous flowers, which can be used to bounce high into the air to reach platforms and items to collect.



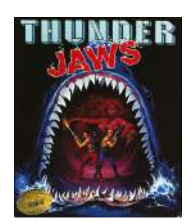


INTERVIEW

JOLYON MYERS

Veteran artist and designer Jolyon 'Joe' Myers has been in the games industry from the days of the 8-bit computers, all the way up to his current role at Infinity Ward, and creating beautiful environments for the Call Of Duty series. He talks to games™ about the key moments of his 30-year career

SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



ThunderJaws [1990] Artist



Agent Armstrong [1997] Lead Artist/ Design



Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 [2011] Design/Artist

Were you artistic at school?
Art was definitely my favourite subject at school. My teacher was very encouraging to me in my artistic endeavours not only on paper, but also on the computer when I started using my skills on the technology of the time. I also liked history, although I spent too much time on the drawings sometimes required in coursework! I also learned piano up to grade three, and had an astute ear; I could figure out other people's tunes on the piano and create my own. When I was eventually able to write music on a computer, I was really able to get creative and put all my ideas down relatively quickly.

Do you remember your first experiences of videogames?
I remember often going to Hayling Island and Southsea to go to the large arcades that are not so commonplace today, and being wowed by what I considered great graphics in early games such as *Yie Ar Kung-Fu*. *Marble Madness* was a game I thought looked really impressive too, and still has a nice but simple style. As time went on, I really loved a lot of Capcom's graphics, and also Irem's art in In *The Hunt*.

What about at home?
The Oric-1 was my first computer, although I do remember being envious of friends with more popular computers such as the Spectrum, even though at the time the Oric was more powerful. Seeing friends playing the games by Ultimate in particular really made me want to try doing graphics on a computer. *Knight Lore* and *Alien 8* definitely caught my attention.

How did your career begin?
After the Oric-1, my father bought the family a BBC Micro Model B. Eventually I learned enough BASIC to write my own line drawing program to sketch in the rough layout of the image before I started zooming in and adding detail. Once I had created a bunch of images, I sent them to Superior Software in Leeds, as they seemed to be one of the largest companies producing games for the BBC Micro. It seemed like an age before they called me – it was only one week! – and I was asked to do the loading screen for a game called *Syncron*, which was like a vertically-scrolling version of *Uridium*. It wasn't long after that I saw that loading screen in a review of the game along with a nice compliment, and at that point I knew I really would like to do this for a living.

> **IT WAS A FANTASTIC EXPERIENCE FOR ME AS IT WAS GREAT TO BE COLLABORATING WITH A TALENTED BUNCH OF FUN CHARACTERS**

Was Domark your first job?
Actually, before Domark I did some work experience in the office of Top Ten Software thanks to Darryl Still. He very kindly



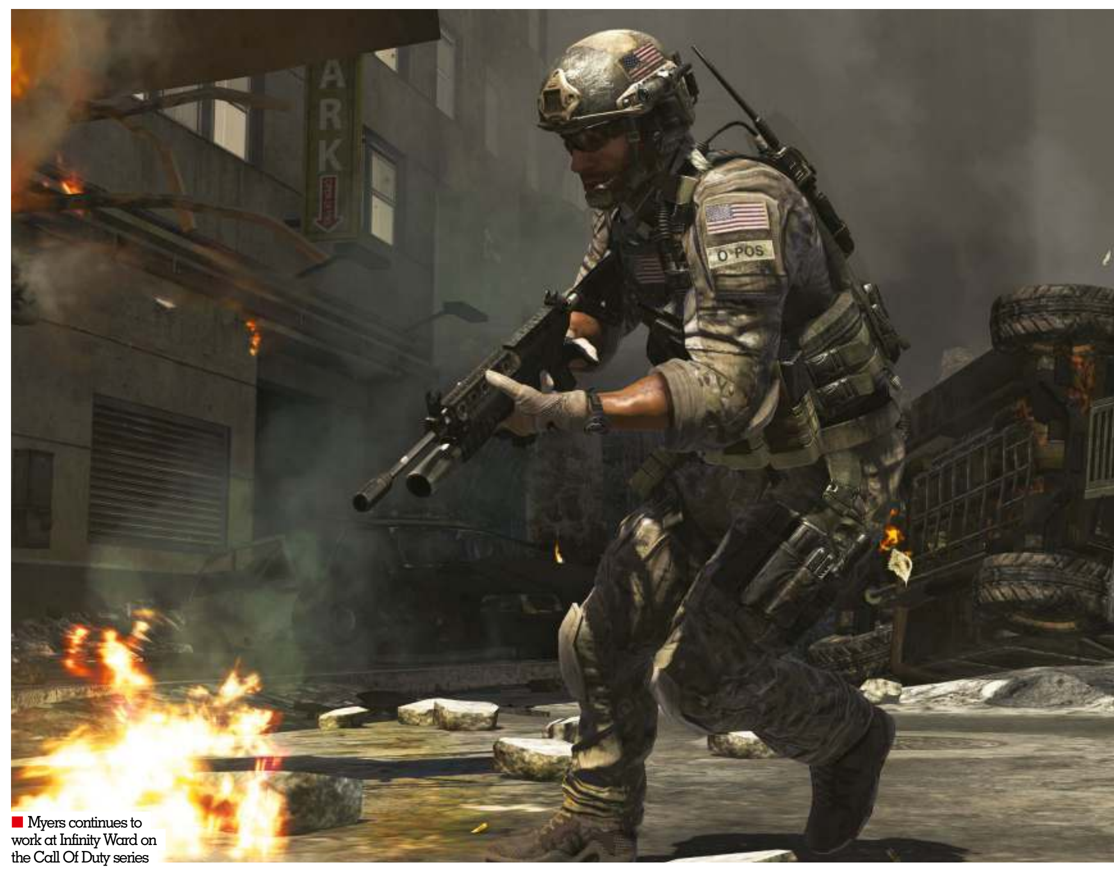
DARRYL STILL

"I'm very proud to have given Jolyon his first job in the industry when he was just a schoolboy, doing the art for our CD covers at Audiogenic. We would just give him the slimmest brief and he would produce exactly what was in our minds every time. Great artist and a great lad."









■ Myers continues to work at Infinity Ward on the Call Of Duty series

arranged it as I had worked with him doing freelance loading screens for Audiogenic previously. Not long after that, I made an animated cartoon-style movie sequence with music as something I could possibly get work from. I went to the ECTS computer show at Olympia in 1989, and at the Domark stand was able to show off my work directly to John Kavanagh, who was running the development office of Domark in Addlestone, called The Kremlin. Soon after I started there, and that was my full-time career.

What was it like working at Domark?
It was a fantastic experience for me, as it was great to be collaborating with a talented bunch of fun characters. Not long after I joined, we had a Christmas party, and Dominic and Mark [Wheatley and Strachan, Domark bosses] came down to Weybridge to eat and drink with everyone. They were extremely likeable guys, they appreciated my efforts and were very encouraging. Ian Livingstone was also my boss for a while, and also a great guy to work for, obviously quite an icon as well.

After Domark you briefly worked at Argonaut in London before King Of The Jungle.
I had become pretty adept at 2D animation, and really wanted to transfer some of those skills into 3D. But I was only at Argonaut for three months before I got a call from my friends Chris and Tony West, who I had worked with closely at Domark. They had recently completed a really cool game called *Street Racer*, and wanted to set up their own company along with Raff Cecco and Stephane Koenig. I felt bad at leaving Argonaut after such a short time, but it was exciting to start a company with these people, and soon after I joined I got the title of creative director. My first game for them was *Agent Armstrong* for Virgin, a platform shoot-'em-up incorporating a blend of real-time semi-3D environments and pre-rendered sprites derived from more complex animated 3D models. This was the first game where I had to learn 3D environment tools and the complexities of 3D animation in 3D studio. Raff had written a great engine that ran at 60 fps, so learning how to limit myself to make sure the game ran at that speed was invaluable knowledge that I still use today. I also did all the orchestral music score on my Roland synthesisers, and created all the FMV movie sequences and sound to go with them. I spread myself pretty thin on that game!

After *Agent Armstrong*, what else did you work on at King Of The Jungle?
I did a similar spread of work with the same team on *B-Movie*, and then *Galaga: Destination Earth* (for Hasbro) and *Grooverider*, which was a slot car racing game.



■ A selection of still art from the PlayStation game, *Agent Armstrong*.



■ Myers' cartoon-like work on *Agent Armstrong* helped give the PlayStation game its alternative look.









■ King Of The Jungle's *B-Movie* was a decent-sized hit for the studio.



■ Part of Myers' work on the abandoned *Deadlight* (no relation to the Deep Silver game) was this odd-looking monster.

You moved on from KOTJ in 2003 and ended up in the US with Pandemic.
It was getting tougher and tougher to sell our ideas to publishers or bid for work, and the golden years of British development seemed to be waning. My wife and I had two daughters that we needed to provide for, and it was a really hard decision to leave my friends Raff and Steph, who were the remaining owners left at that time. I joined Blue 52 as one of the founders, Jason Perkins, I had worked with on *B-Movie* while he was at GT Interactive. They had made a great company, at the time over 250 people, and I had never worked in a studio so large. But like many places, Blue 52's work started to dry up as more and more American publishers chose developers from other, cheaper parts of the world, or on their own soil. It was then that I started to look at the States. It looked like there was a serious opportunity there, and although I had never completely aspired to work there, I really liked the games that Pandemic were making, coupled with the fact that myself and my family could have an adventure in sunny California for a while!

At Pandemic you worked on the underrated WWII game, *The Saboteur*.
I was part of over 100 people, so by far the largest team I'd worked with up until then. After a few months as senior artist, I did a talk at GDC about some old-school tricks I was creating to make low polygon stuff look high resolution, including upgraded versions of what I had done on the PS1 working with Raff Cecco on *B-Movie*, as that was a full 3D game running at 60 fps. Once I did the talk, I was made lead artist and developed a lot of the tricks we used to create props and environments for the world. Working on such a large open world, researching all the spaces, building them and filling them all with gameplay was a huge undertaking, but a really rewarding one. It's the only game I've worked on where it was so large, you didn't know what the design team had added gameplay-wise in certain areas until you happened upon it. *The Saboteur* was probably one of the most fun games I have had the privilege to make, with a lovely bunch of talented people.

After a short stint at Electronic Arts, you began at your current workplace, Infinity Ward, in 2011. Did you continue to use your 'old-school knowledge'?
Yep! On *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*, I used it to pull off a Paris level that had you way up in the air in an AC130 plane, showing huge vistas, while still being able to slam down and have gameplay on the ground in the same environment. Then for *COD: Ghosts*, I created an underwater level that the game was revealed with on a huge 180-degree screen at E3. With *Infinite Warfare*, I worked closely with Dan Savage and the vehicle team to pull off huge detailed spaceships, which like my old PS2 games, had to run at 60 fps. I loved the challenge of this game, to try and make a futuristic game as real-world relatable as possible, and I created many models and animated sequences to prove what we could do during the pre-production phase.

I WILL SAY I LOVE THE FACT I'M STILL USING TRICKS I DEVELOPED AND LEARNED ON MACHINES 20 OR MORE YEARS AGO

It must seem an incredibly different world today – from designing levels within 48k on the ZX Spectrum to incredibly detailed and realistic worlds on modern consoles. Do you ever look back and think about that?
I think about the past all the time, as I'm passionate about my roots in the industry, I've been in it so long. I will say I love the fact I'm still using tricks I developed and learned on machines 20 or more years ago, and that the games I make today still benefit from them.

Looking back at your long career, what do you consider your favourite time working in the games industry?
My eight years with Raff, Steph and the gang at KOTJ were really fun and hard work. I was young and willing to work all night and weekends, and do a spread of work. It was a time where I could get away with doing tons of art, video and music for a project, which is something that's not physically possible for one guy to do on the large scale of games today. There was no period from my teenage years at Domark through to Pandemic and Infinity Ward that I didn't really enjoy. There were difficult times, but also so many great memories and learning experiences.

Finally, as you are still in the industry today, do you have any career advice for readers wanting to make their start?
I would say not to completely pigeon-hole yourself into just one slot if you are capable of more. Regardless of your actual title, try and use your other skills to prove new ideas or improve ones that exist already. My role at Infinity Ward is a design one, yet I constantly use my knowledge of art and sound/music to help me in my job. For me, it's made a pretty long career constantly interesting and enjoyable.





Symphony Of The Night was actually Koji Igarashi's first Castlevania game, a series he became synonymous with in the years since.

GAME CHANGERS

CASTLEVANIA: SYMPHONY OF THE NIGHT

Developer: Konami Computer Entertainment Tokyo **Publisher:** Konami **Released:** 20 March 1997 **System:** PSone, Sega Saturn

It went on to help define a genre of action platforming, but why was this classic ignored by many on release, and why is it so important today?

HINDSIGHT BEING WHAT it is, we can look back now at the launch of *Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night* and see beyond its initial poor sales figures and the fact that neither Konami or Sony seemed interested in supporting its PlayStation release with much advertising, and see how important and timely its arrival was for the future of gaming. While the industry at large (and most gamers with it) was intoxicated by the allure of 3D graphics and the new technical feats that could be achieved, the KCET team wanted to offer what felt like one last hoorah to the humble pixel art platformer. But in so doing, it managed to prove that there was still room for creativity and innovation in this field of game design, art direction and level design.

"IT WAS THE SUM TOTAL OF ALL OF THESE MECHANICS COMBINING TO CREATE A WHOLLY NEW GAMING EXPERIENCE THAT SHOWS THE TRUE INNOVATIVE SPIRIT OF THE GAME"

Directed by Toru Hagihara, who had steered the previous release *Rondo Of Blood*, and joined by assistant director Koji Igarashi (who would go on to work on Castlevania for the next 13 years at least), *Symphony Of The Night* was a merging of previous systems and mechanics from the Castlevania series, along with ideas from the best and brightest titles of the departing 2D era. One of the most vital changes was the non-linear progression through the castle as you travelled back and forth through different sections of the world, unlocking new abilities and grinding through demons in an effort to level up your abilities before tackling the next big challenge.

THE KEY CHARACTERS

SYMPHONY OF THE NIGHT BROUGHT BACK SOME CLASSIC CHARACTERS IN NEW ROLES



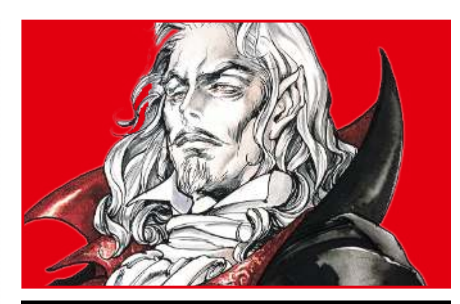
ALUCARD

★ The half-human, half-vampire son of Dracula takes the lead here, but first appeared in *Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse*, challenging and then assisting Trevor Belmont in his quest to take down Dracula. His subsequent guilt over killing his own father leads him to go into a sort of hibernation until the events of *SOTN*.



RICHTER BELMONT

★ The hero of *Castlevania: Rondo Of Blood* returns at the start of *Symphony Of The Night* to retell the conclusion of his previous adventure, only to disappear shortly afterwards and then return claiming to be the new lord of Dracula's castle. He is, in fact, under an enchantment by Dracula's dark priest servant Shaft.



DRACULA

★ The classic villain of the Castlevania series is once again resurrected, only to be put down, but this time he faces his own son, and as a result of this (and his discovering the final words of Alucard's mother to not harm humanity), he dies as something of a tragic figure rather than a personification of pure evil.

Of course, now we have a very simple, if not particularly elegant, word for describing this style of world design: Metroidvania. We're actually not massive fans of this portmanteau, although the we can't deny that it has proven to be a useful shorthand for games that have since been influenced by *Super Metroid* and this Castlevania release in particular. *Symphony Of The Night* was of course itself taking some of the *Super Metroid* formula and adding it to its traditional 2D action template, but the addition of deeper character progression systems and upgrades was something else on top. The introduction of the Inverted Castle, should you free rather than slay Richter Belmont, was also a massive twist, inviting repeat visits to the game to unlock new features and collect previously missed items. Castlevania became a living game experience that required interaction between fans, sharing of theories and experimentation.

In isolation, so many of these features were not that new, which may be why *Symphony Of The Night* was criticised for lacking innovation by some quarters upon release, but looking back now, it was the sum total of all of these mechanics combining to create a wholly new gaming experience that shows the true innovative spirit of the game. Similarly, while on the surface of things the 2D graphics might be thought to be a retread of the past, offering little new compared to its 3D competitors, we can look back and see that with the mixture of 16-colour and 256-colour palettes, Konami was able to draw some of the most detailed and expressive characters models in gaming history, as well as some stunning world design.

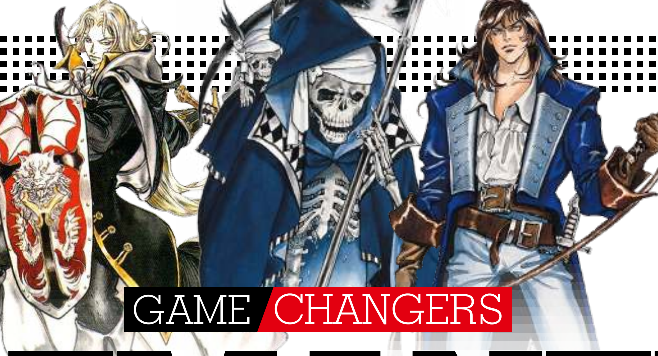
The additional power of the PlayStation, and shortly after the Sega Saturn when the game was ported to that system, may have enabled 3D rendered graphics, but they also allowed for incredible pixel density and variety. *Symphony Of The Night* expresses this best in its world design with the incredible richness and depth to its gothic architecture and interior decoration. Dracula's castle is packed with details and environmental elements that draw you into the world. Their pixelart, 2D design actually enhances them somewhat, as they can play against your expectations, offering interactivity or traps where you might otherwise not expect to find them.

So why is all of that important? Well, because the race towards 3D had started so quickly that few developers were asking if they were done perfecting 2D design. And of course, the answer was no, as *Symphony Of The Night* proved by improving on so much and pointing in the direction of improvements to come. Sony and Konami didn't believe much in the game's chances of success, and so there was little advertising for the North American release, and not many copies made either, but word of mouth spread eventually and the game quickly took on a cult following. In so doing it proved that there was a future for 2D experiences; that it remained a rich style of game design for developers to experiment with, and that there would always be an audience for such games out there.

Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night is the connective tissue that bridges the 16- and 32-bit generations, and by extension modern gaming, with classic videogame design. Along with *Super Metroid*, it came to define a style of non-linear action platforming and exploration games that we now call Metroidvania. It helped to launch the career of Koji Igarashi, who has continued to play in this field, embellishing and enhancing the template first established with this release. It brought us the incredible art direction of Ayami Kojima, who would work on the series until 2010 designing characters and painting its stunning artwork again and again. It showed us that the we weren't ready to leave our past behind just yet, and thanks to that lesson we continue to see incredible 2D work today.

KEY FACTS

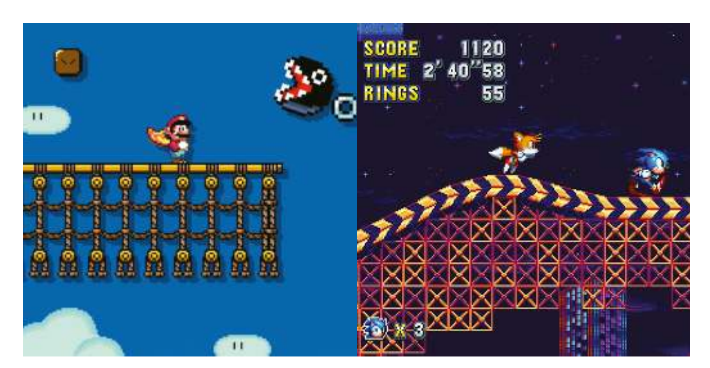
- Part of the inspiration behind the more RPG elements of SOTN was apparently the team seeing copies of old Castlevania games in bargain bins in Japan, which they took as evidence that the series needed replay value.
- Depending on your performance as Richter Belmont in the prologue of the game, Alucard could start off the story with vastly improved stats or items already in his inventory.
- A hidden song can be found on track two of the game disc if it's placed in an audio player, although a message from Alucard also plays warning against doing this.



GAME CHANGERS

PORTMANTEAU NO YOU DIDN'T

WHAT IF WE USED GAME TITLE MASH-UPS TO DESCRIBE ALL OUR FAVOURITE VIDEOGAME GENRES?



SUPER MANIC

A 2D platformer most popular in the 8- and 16-bit eras of gaming, but still holding a place in our hearts. The Super Manic game involves a series of linear, largely left-to-right stages, ending with a gate of some kind with an overall level score accumulated through the collection of gold items (rings, coins, whatever), dispatching of enemies and the speed with which the level is completed overall. A perfect vehicle for hardware manufacturer mascots, it also works well in 2.5D format.



VIRTUKEN

A 3D fighting game born from the traditions of the 2D arcade fighter, but grounding the combat (somewhat) more within the bounds of punch and kick combinations than projectiles and special moves. The Virtuken still holds a more or less side-on camera position, but allows for side stepping and movement within a three-dimensional plain, opening up new tactical opportunities and creating cat-and-mouse scenarios. While somewhat out of favour, its pro competition standing remains high.



DUAKE

The classic FPS formula, involving a single (probably male) hero tackling swarms of monsters/undead/space Nazis with guns large enough to make Olympic powerlifters wince. The Duake is the purist form of FPS, with everything funnelled towards the 'down the barrel' experience. The gun is centrally placed, and ammo is plentiful, but design invites regular weapon switching. Blood and gore are its staple 'rewards' for good play.



TOMBCHARTED

An action adventure-style game inspired by Indiana Jones, Tombcharted games provide a mix of third-person shooter combat, area-wide puzzle solving and acrobatic platforming. They often offer alternate histories around artefacts and historical events, with world-shaking repercussions should related treasures fall into the wrong hands. Increasingly, it explores the duality of being both a treasure hunter and amateur world saver.



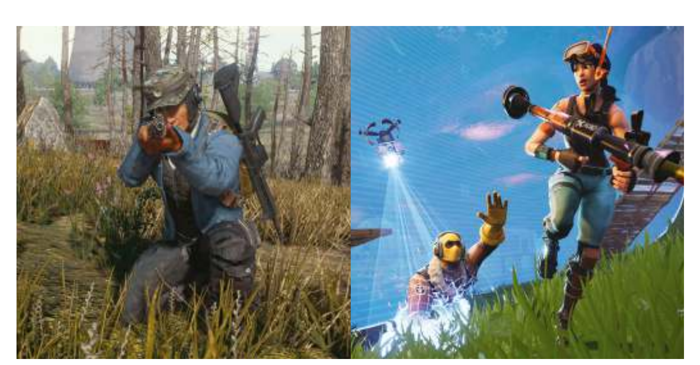
RIDGETONA

The racing genre that proves that the fastest way around a race track is sideways, the Ridgetona game is about drifting and rewarding risky driving with additional speed and/or points. While racing against opponents is not uncommon, they are often best expressed in solo play, with the full track to drift your way around. Blue skies are essential, a sea view optimal and a thumping drum and bass soundtrack preferable.



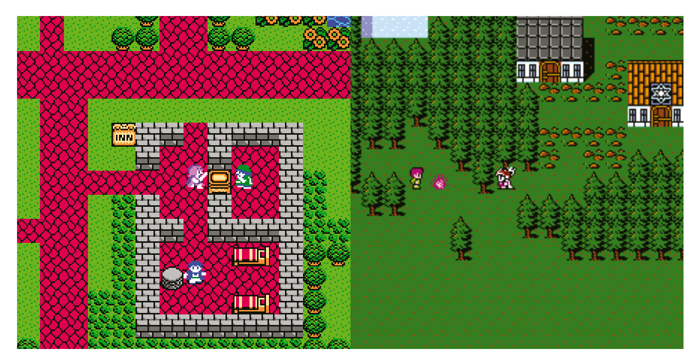
SCROLLOUT

A first-person RPG offering varied forms of combat depending on the genre setting, but always allowing for lots of player-defined narrative choices and player-character customisation. The Scrollout is often set in a massive open-world, with little defined narrative direction save for one overarching mission that needs to be gradually accomplished. The Scrollout will allow players to specialise their player character in a relatively loose way rather than through defined character class.



PUBNITE

The Pubnite is a massive online shooter experience usually involving 100 players working solo or in teams on an island map. It then introduces a circular safety zone that will close in at regular intervals, forcing all surviving players to head inwards. The ever-diminishing space means that conflict becomes more and more likely, ultimately resulting in a winner being declared when everyone else had fallen. Sometimes there's dinner.



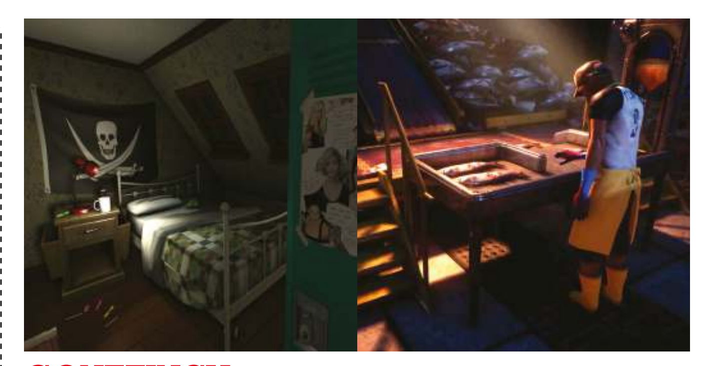
QUESTACY

While it has gone through many evolutions, the Questacy game still carries many of the staple mechanics of the 8-bit era. Core among these is a turn-based combat system that involves tactical use of abilities from a team of characters of mixed combat class. It leans towards fantasy, although may couch some of its mysticism in scientific language. Additionally, such games involve massive world exploration and random combat encounters.



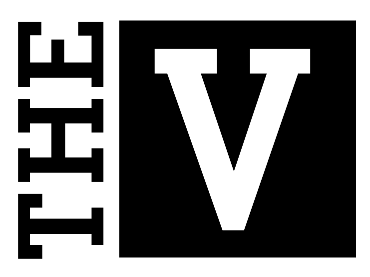
METALCELL

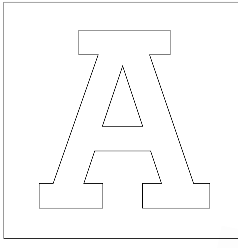
This third-person action experience is all about stealth, directing the player to keep to shadowy areas, stay touch-tight to walls or cover, and make slow, gradual progress, completely avoiding enemy contact wherever possible. The experience can turn to all-out action, but will often offer the player the option for nonfatal take-downs of the enemy, such as choke holds and tranquilliser darts. Such modes of play would typically be considered the 'correct' way to play the Metalcell experience.

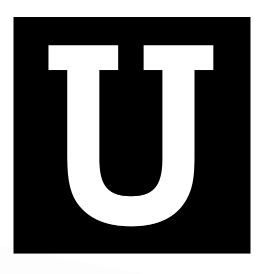


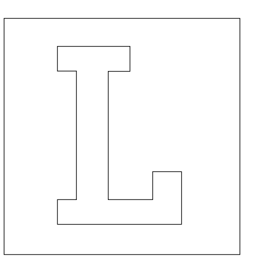
GONEFINCH

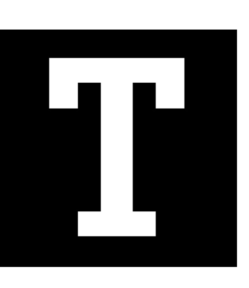
The Gonefinch is a narrative-focused experience that builds its story by exploring the game world, light puzzle solving and finding objects that continue the narrative. It will rarely involve any direct combat mechanics, and will vary its level of puzzle solving, but will always feature a detailed game world with a clear sense of place and strongly defined characters, even if you only experience them through their recorded materials.











STEALTH 300 HEADSET

MANUFACTURER: **TURTLE BEACH** PRICE: **£69.99**

Good old Turtle Beach. Reliable, affordable and a great way to beef up your audio experience with a some made-for-purpose headphones. The Turtle Beach range continues to offer an excellent level of quality at a mix of price points so that you can get the most from your investment, and the Stealth 300 headset delivers again, although not without issues.

It's all about the performance though, and with these headphones you're getting a lot more control than you even get with some higher-priced models. A mode selection button on the left ear cup allows you to select bass boost, treble boost or bass and treble boost on top of the normal playback option. Cycling through the settings on a good loud game really shows as you get meatier explosions with bass boost and more defined voices with treble. This also has its applications if you're using the headset just for music, of course.

We did find the bass boost to be relatively weak for what it was trying to do, and it made everything else sound a little muddier as a result. What you're playing is going to make a big difference here, or course. Perhaps more frustrating is the button placement, right next to the power button on the headset and with not much differentiation in their profile to judge them on touch alone.

The bigger annoyance for us, though, is charging this headset at all. It simply won't work unless charged, and while there's the promise of 40 hours of playback with it, charging a headset even if we don't want to use its fancier features seems like a lot. Perhaps you're cool with that, but it feels like a nuisance to us.

Ultimately, if you have the patience with it, there's good value here and some excellent features available. Definitely an upgrade for a moderate investment.

uk.turtlebeach.com

VERDICT 7/10



As well as being a generally comfortable cushion on this headset, it also features what Turtle Beach calls its ProSpecs technology that means they're comfy to play when wearing glasses

The headset mic couldn't be easier to use. If you want to mute it you just flick it back up and that's it.

GAMING CLOTHING



VENOM SNAKE HOODIE

As the weather begins to get a little colder, it seems sensible to seek shelter beneath a warming jumper and hood, and this is a great one from Insert Coin, inspired by Snake from *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain.* The red sleeve is a nice touch.
www.insertcoinclothing.com



COLOSSUS HOODIE

Love the design on this one with a simple embroidered Wander on the front and weak point prints in light blue on the back and on top of the hood. Subtlety in places and then that strong splash of colour to help it stand out.
www.insertcoinclothing.com



SUN BROS OF ASTORA HOODIE

Based on the armour of Solaire of Astora in *Dark Souls*, this jumper has a great colour scheme, a strong sun logo at the centre and an embroidered message on the back. Only the power of the sun can truly keep you warm.
www.playstation-gear.com

THEMED COLLECTION: PLAYSTATION FANATICS

PARAPPA THE RAPPER STUBBINS PLUSH

PRICE: **£14.99**

Any PlayStation fan worth their salt will have their roots going back to the early days of the console, and they'll have a special place in their heart for the cult classic that is *PaRappa The Rapper.* So what better way to celebrate that game of flat, 2D characters rapping than a 3D plush toy? Makes perfect sense to us.
www.playstation-gear.com



PLAYSTATION GAME COASTERS

PRICE: **£7.49**

Bringing together a PlayStation fanatic's room is about making sure you have the small details covered, and a nice set of PSone game cover coasters seems like a great example of that. From *Destruction Derby* to *WipEout*, this is a very nice little set for a very reasonable price.
www.playstation-gear.com



PLAYSTATION 4 PURSE

PRICE: **£27.99**

This is a very stylish little number, with its clean black leather exterior and metallic logo, and beneath that bold PlayStation blue for the interior. There are plenty of slots for all of your cards, a zipped section for keeping loose change in and some wonderful detailing, like the classic logo and button shapes on the inside.
www.playstation-gear.com



PLAYSTATION SHAPE LIGHT

PRICE: **£24.99**

Representing the shapes on the PlayStation controller that have become so iconic for the brand, this light offers a number of different modes. You have your standard illumination, you can set it to a colour phasing mode that cycles through the lights and their different colours, or you can use the music reactive mode that has the lights shift to a beat. All very smart, and really quite a nice little lamp.
www.playstation-gear.com



DUALSHOCK 4 CONTROLLER INFLATABLE CHAIR

PRICE: **£25.99**

What we like about this chair is that it's both fun and kind of practical. On the fun side, it's obviously a nice little homage to the updated classic that is the DualShock 4, with all of its style and features recreated nicely to make a back rest for the seat. But on a practical level, it's always a good idea to have a spare gaming chair available.
www.playstation-gear.com



DUALSHOCK 3 CONTROLLER STRESS RELIEVER

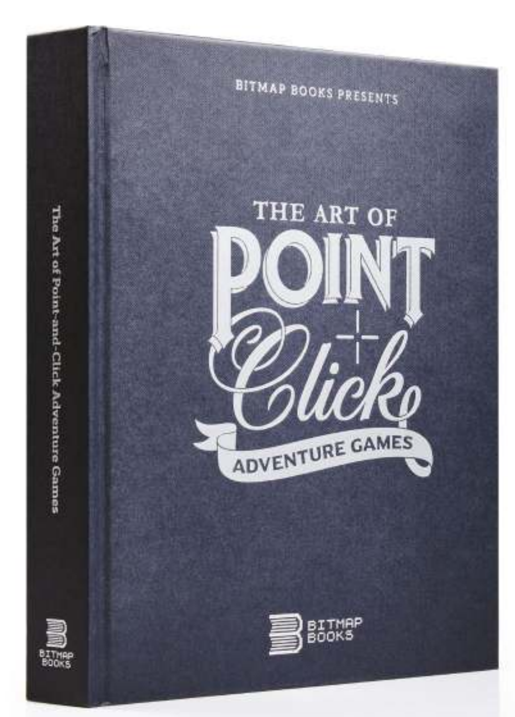
PRICE: **£7.49**

The many ages of the PlayStation have brought with them many different incarnation so the DualShock controller, but the stress of losing out to your mate in a game of FIFA in the dying minutes hasn't changed, and it's much better that you take your rage out on this foam controller than the real one. Chuck, squeeze and vent as much as you need.
www.playstation-gear.com



THE ART OF POINT-AND-CLICK ADVENTURE GAMES

PUBLISHER: **BITMAP BOOKS**



'Comprehensive' is the first word that comes to mind having read through *The Art Of Point-And-Click Adventure Games*, and not just because it chronicles the genre from *Enchanted Scepters* in 1984 to *The Darkside Detective* in 2017. This is more than just a collection of screenshots listing the big names in the long history of this resurgent genre, as it also manages to pin down long-form interviews with every big name from the genre you can think of. From Tim Schafer and Ron Gilbert to Jane Jensen and Charles Cecil, this is packed with direct insight from the makers of these amazing games.

The book breaks it all down pretty smartly, giving you full spread images of the big releases, sometimes followed by additional images and a brief write-up of their content and then, more often than not, immediately followed with a multi-page interview with one of the key game-makers behind the project. It adds a lot of depth and detail to the experience that is often lacking in collections such as these. The genre focus brings with it even greater dedication to capturing all of the details of these titles.

The images have been superbly captured so that every pixel is as crisp as can be, there's a nice smattering of concept art in places (some *Machinarium*, *Dropsy* and *Broken Age* art stands out in our minds) and it's very nicely packaged in the hardback edition, as we've come to expect from Bitmap Books. Another fine addition to the publisher's line of retro-focused releases. Some more genre pieces in the future would be most welcome.

www.bitmapbooks.co.uk



FALLOUT: THE VAULT DWELLER'S OFFICIAL COOKBOOK

Inspired by foods from the game, this cookbook will show you how to recreate classics like Yum Yum Devilled Eggs and BlamCo Mac & Cheese., Not so sure about throwing Deathclaw meat on the grill, but that's in there too among the more than 70 recipes this book includes.

www.titanbooks.com



THE ART OF ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY

Join Ubisoft as it journeys back to ancient Greece and the power of Sparta, recreating a lost world with its own particular spin, merging reality with myth to make something very special indeed. These art books are always a joy to flick through, and this is no different.

www.titanbooks.com



THE ART OF METAL GEAR SOLID I-IV

This collection chronicles four games' worth of concept art, character designs, storyboards and more from the Metal Gear Solid series. It's a fascinating look at the way in which so much of the series evolved with each generation and what elements held firm throughout its lifespan.

www.darkhorse.com



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Let's return to games™
when issue 206 arrives...
on sale 1 November

